OLD!
retro GAMER™
PRESENTS
THE ULTIMATE
PLATFORMER
HANDBOOK
132
PAGES OF MARIO, SONIC, RAYMAN AND MORE!'
LEAP THROUGH THE HISTORY OF GAMING'S MOST INVENTIVE GENRE
Digital Edition
FUTURE
SECOND EDITION

PLATFORMER HANDBOOK

Try to take a snapshot of the picture in your mind when you think of the word, 'videogame'. We can imagine many of you conjured a side-on image featuring a hero character, a sprinkling of enemies, collectable coins, and a bunch of ledges and pathways suspended in the air.

Nothing says videogaming like a good old platformer. From *Donkey Kong*, *Pitfall* and *Manic Miner* to *Super Mario*, *Sonic* and *Crash Bandicoot*, this genre is home to many people's favourite games. And for a good reason: they're easy to pick up and difficult to master, a magic combo for a compelling experience that's difficult to tear yourself away from.

In this special edition from the makers of **Retro Gamer**, get ready to leap through history as we hop, skip and jump through the story of the platformer. We'll explore how the genre evolved, explore defining games and spotlight some modern classics you'll be sure to enjoy.

Lace up your boots, and maybe attach some springs. Let's jump in!

FUTURE

THE ULTIMATE PLATFORMER HANDBOOK

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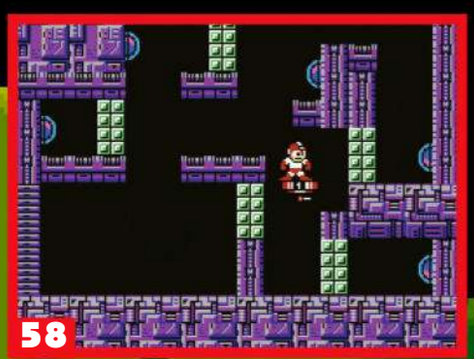

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THE EVOLUTION OF PLATFO

What's happened to the platformer, eh? 30 years ago it dominated sales charts and gamers' hearts, but these days it seems to have lost its power inside mainstream gaming. Retro Gamer looks at the rise and fall of this once great giant...

The platformer was once the king of videogames, but in recent years it seems to fallen by the wayside in favour of lucrative live-service offerings. In our opinion, it's likely one of the reasons why platformers became so popular in the Nineties is because they showed 8-bit and 16-bit games tech in the most fun and flattering light, and at the peak of their popularity some of the best talents in the industry were making them. Platformers were also pretty ubiquitous beasts too, with other popular games and genres containing platformery elements if you looked hard enough – from shooters (Mega Man, Contra) to racers (Unirally).

From a development perspective, platformers also had benefits. In their prime, they didn't rely on fancy graphics or worlds, and didn't require tens of buttons and dual-analogue sticks to control. A trusty d-pad or joystick to move a hero in two opposite directions, and a single button to make them jump, was as complex as their controls needed to be, which made the vast majority of them simple to pick up and universally accessible.

In terms of the genre's decline in popularity, we suspect age probably has a part to play. Gamers who enjoyed playing platformers in the Nineties may feel that the genre is less relevant to them now. Like toys and cartoons, some may feel they've outgrown them and look to more mature-looking gaming experiences for entertainment.

But it's important to stress, of course, that the platformer is still very much alive and well today. *Super Mario Odyssey* was one of biggest successes on Nintendo Switch, while Sony's *Astro Bot* series is establishing itself as a viable alternative and a forerunner in the world of virtual reality. And you need only look to indie game development for innovative 2D platformers. Titles such as *Super Meat Boy* and *Fez* and *Celeste* prove that platformers are much alive and jumping, and they do well to remind us that still, regardless of technology, probably no genre looks and 'feels' most like a classic videogame than a platformer. Over the next few pages, we take a look at the genre's history, charting its rise and fall, speaking to developers who helped to shape jump-filled phenomenon. ▶

> "It's important to stress that the platformer is alive and well today"

PLATFORMERS

KNOW YOUR PLATFORMER

THE GENRE IS PRETTY UBIQUITOUS, SO WE ATTEMPT TO CATEGORISE ITS MANY DIFFERENT FLAVOURS...

SINGLE-SCREEN

Typified by: *Donkey Kong, Mario Bros, Bubble Bobble*
Characteristics: The earliest type of platformer, they often require you to clear the screen of enemies or get to a specific part of the level.

SHOOTER

Typified by: *Jump Bug, Ghouls 'N Ghosts*
Characteristics: This was the first example of scrolling platformer, and has gradually evolved over the years into the excellent run-and-gun genre.

ADVENTURE

Typified by: *Pitfall!, Metroid, Castlevania*
Characteristics: Will often feature explorative gameplay, requiring the player to locate something or level up their character to progress.

PUZZLE

Typified by: *Lemmings, The Lost Vikings*
Characteristics: Has the characteristic look of a platformer but its core gameplay is often based around resource management and logic-based gameplay.

CINEMATIC

Typified by: *Prince Of Persia, Flashback, Oddworld*
Characteristics: Often feature detailed worlds, rotoscope heroes and deeper narratives than other styles of platformer. Modern examples include Limbo and Inside.

2.5D

Typified by: *Clockwork Knight, Tomba!, Klonoa, New Super Mario Bros*
Characteristics: The gameplay essence of a side-scrolling 2D platformer that is presented as a 3D world viewed side-on. Often seen on handhelds.

3D

Typified by: *Super Mario 64, Banjo-Kazooie, Spyro The Dragon, Conker's Bad Fur Day*
Characteristics: Fully 3D world, often featuring a collection element and strong narrative that makes them most feel like a descendant of the adventure-platformer.

ENDLESS RUNNERS

Typified by: *Jetpack Joyride, Canabalt, Temple Run*
Characteristics: Similar to the forced scrolling levels found in certain platformers, but here you continue forever until you hit an obstacle. Ideally suited for mobile devices.

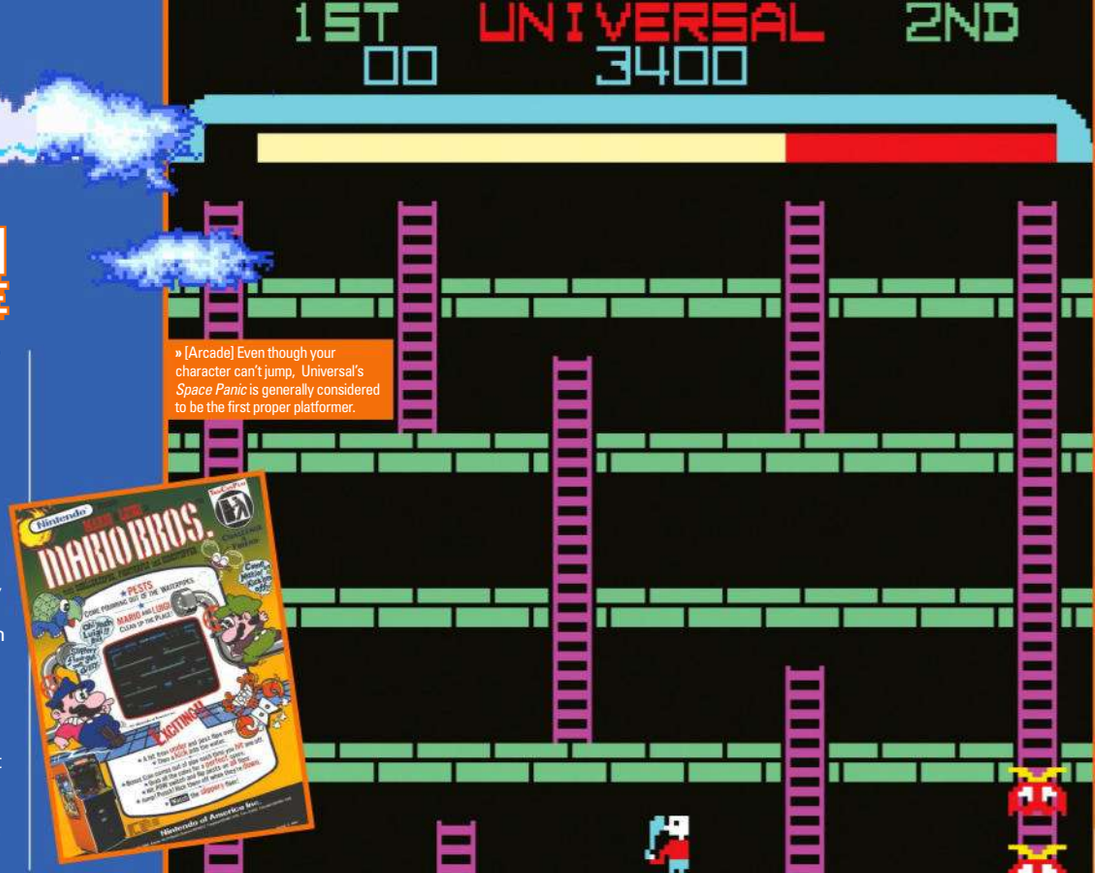
8-BIT GENERATION
BIRTH OF A GENRE

So what was the first-ever platformer? Well, the answer to that question is open to debate, as it depends on your definition of what a platformer actually is. And there are many variations of the form. Many cite Universal's 1980 coin-op *Space Panic* as the first. It certainly looked like one, with inviting cartoony graphics and single-screen stages adorned with colourful platforms connected by ladders and bug-eyed, tomato-looking alien enemies.

However, the point of contention stems from the fact your player-character can't actually jump. With the absence of the all-important staple of future platformers, you got around in *Space Panic* by using ladders and digging traps for your enemies to fall into. Proving that even the most seminal games often owe a debt to something, *Space Panic*'s trap-'em-up gameplay is believed to have been inspired by *Heiankyo Alien*, an earlier Japanese top-down maze computer game that sees a policeman defending Earth from space invaders.

But if jumping is the defining characteristic then Nintendo's smash hit *Donkey Kong*, released in 1981, was probably the first platformer to contain all the core elements. Though its 'building climbing' theme shares a lot of similarities with Nichibutsu's earlier 1980 jumping-less platformer *Crazy Climber*, *Donkey Kong* saw players trying to get a little carpenter hero (who later became Mario) from a point A to a point B to complete a stage. It also featured a power-up (the hammer), individually themed levels, ended on a sort-of boss battle, and, most crucially, featured that all-important jump mechanic. Becoming incredibly successful, like the big, brash ape he is portrayed as in the game, *Donkey Kong* took much of *Space Panic*'s thunder, which is why many regard this as the first platform game.

Though obscure, the 1981 coin-op *Jump Bug*, released a few months after *DK*, is deemed by many as the first ever side-scrolling platformer (with smooth scrolling no less), certainly the most influential was David Crane's *Pitfall!* in 1982. With interconnected flick-screens that



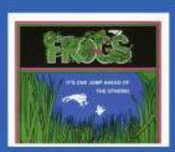
» [Arcade] Even though your character can't jump, Universal's *Space Panic* is generally considered to be the first proper platformer.

DID YOU KNOW?

- As well as *Space Panic*, Universal was also behind the *Mr Do!* series. Its sequel, *Mr Do's Castle*, features very similar designs to *Space Panic*.
- *Pitfall!* is the second most successful Atari 2600 game of all time and the best-selling from a third-party developer.
- *Donkey Kong* is the first videogame to use in-game cutscenes to tell its narrative.
- The look of *Pac-Land* was inspired by the *Pac-Man* cartoon.
- *Super Mario Bros 3* was the bestselling *Mario Bros* sequel for the NES and sold better than *Super Mario 64*.

» [Arcade] *Super Mario Bros* might have popularised the platformer, but a lot of its innovations were first found in *Pac-Land*.

THE 8-BIT INNOVATIONS



Frogs
1978
Though it's not a platformer, *Frogs* is the first videogame that features a jumping character.

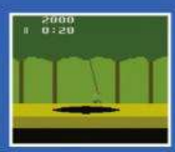
Space Panic
1980
Widely considered by many to be the first platformer, it has the look of one but the hero can't jump.

Crazy Climber
1980
Also falling into the jump-less platformer category, the climbing concept has a parallel with *Donkey Kong*.

Donkey Kong
1981
Donkey Kong shoots the platformer to popularity through cartoon graphics and varied stages.

Jump Bug
1981
The release of *Jump Bug*, a side-scrolling shooter/platformer saw you steering a jumping car.

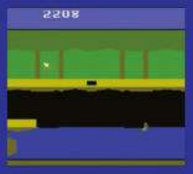
Jungle King
1982
Released a few months before *Pitfall!*, *Jungle King* by Taito had scrolling screens and vine-swinging.



Pitfall!
1982
Pitfall!'s connected flick-screen stages lay down the archetypal template for the side-scrolling platformer.

Miner 2049er
1982
The iconic *DK*-style platformer features ten screens and inspired a raft of popular platformers.

PITFALL! II: THE LOST CAVERNS



David Crane's sequel improved on his original in every area. It's was bigger, smoother, featured swimming sections, and visually and aurally was a notable step up from the first game, which is why many regard it as the best game in the revered series.

could be explored at the player's own pace, giving the impression of a larger game world, *Pitfall!* spawned the adventure-platformer standard, a torch later carried by the likes of the engaging *Metroid* and *Castlevania*.

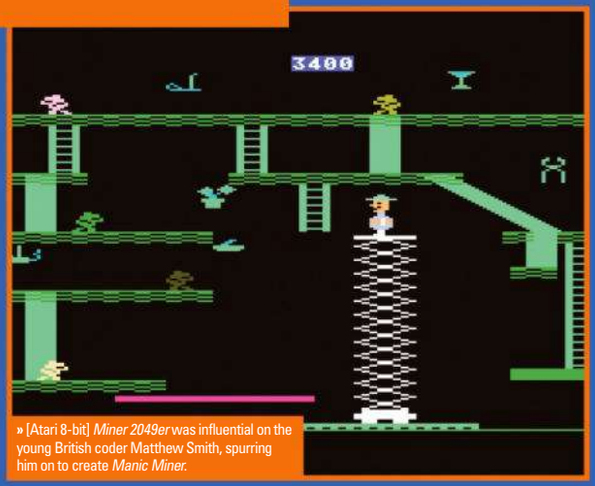
Home computers were also getting into the act, with one of the most notable examples being Bill Hogue's *Miner 2049er*, a single-screen platformer with different levels, which would go on to influence Matthew Smith's *Manic Miner* and *Jet Set Willy*.

In 1983, Nintendo released *Mario Bros* into arcades. Sticking within a single-screen style environment, *Mario Bros*' design focused on cooperative/competitive gameplay, a concept later improved upon by Taito with its *Bubble Bobble* series. What is also notable about *Mario Bros* is that it saw Mario and Luigi using parts of the level weapons, nudging the platforms from underneath to flip over enemies and make them safe to kick off the stage – a mechanic reused in *Super Mario Bros*

Though the 1985 follow-up *Super Mario Bros* gets all the plaudits for creating the archetypal template, Namco gets a bit of a bum deal here as its side-scrolling platformer *Pac-Land* predates *Super Mario Bros* by almost a year, and features colourful parallax scrolling stages and plenty of variety through power-ups, stage design and varied enemies.

Other important platformers releases in the Eighties include Capcom's *Ghosts 'N Goblins* (1985), which is most notable for going against conventional platform design by ditching colourful sprites for gothic visuals, and accessibility for one of the hardest first stages in a videogame. Capcom followed this up with another-convention eschewing platformer, *Bionic Commando* in 1987, which famously ditched the jump mechanic for a grappling hook. Jordan Mechner then released *Prince Of Persia* for the Apple II in 1989, which popularised the cinematic platformer subgenre – filled by classics like the earlier (1985) *Impossible Mission*, and followed by the likes of *Another World, Flashback* and *Oddworld*. By the end of the Eighties, the platformer was starting to gain momentum, although no one could predict the explosion in popularity the next generation of the genre would enjoy. ▶

> "When you ran Harry onto a new jungle screen, it was you who felt the risk"
> DAVID CRANE



» [Atari 8-bit] *Miner 2049er* was influential on the young British coder Matthew Smith, spurring him on to create *Manic Miner*.

DAVID CRANE

THE CREATOR OF PITFALL!

***Pitfall!* was a landmark platformer. When you were writing it, did you ever think, 'This looks and plays different to everything else'?**

I had that thought nearly every day, but not until after the artistic and technical challenges were met. It has been well documented that *Pitfall!* was one of the first videogames to feature a human-like figure as a main character. At the time I developed *Pitfall!*, most games were either single-screen games, or multiple-screen if they were top-down. To make a game that featured a human player, I needed to present the game differently, because a person doesn't look much like a person from the top. Once the decision was made to make the game with a side view perspective, it was only logical to do a cutaway view of the world. This made for natural 'platforms'.

How important is a strong central hero to a platformer?

The 'Holy Grail' of videogame design is to arouse an emotional response from the player. That was really tough when the main character was a spaceship. But when you play a game with a human avatar, you feel an emotional connection. When you ran Harry onto a new jungle screen, it was you who felt the risk. Without that connection, changing screens would just feel like a camera switch.

What are the ingredients to a great platformer?

It is important to know your audience, and to bring them into the experience gently. A game has to be challenging, but that doesn't mean it has to be extremely difficult. In the Eighties, playing a game usually meant learning new skills with the joystick, or at least learning how to control *this* game's character. To finish *Pitfall!*, one had to learn how to run, jump and climb – easy. But they also had to figure out that they could jump while running – a skill needed to catch the vine – and the hardest, how to jump laterally from a standing start. It would've been the epitome of bad game design if the player had to master that last skill right away.

What are the pros and cons of writing a platform game?

The world of a platformer can be anything the designer can imagine. Ironically, this is as much a con as a pro. If you can do anything, or go anywhere, where do you start?

Smurf: Rescue In Gargamel's Castle 1982
Released for the ColecoVision, one of the first platformers to be based on a popular cartoon licence.

Manic Miner 1983
Arguably the most influential computer platformer to come from a British game programmer.

Mario Bros 1983
Popular in large part for its co-operative gameplay, later refined by Taito's and its *Bubble Bobble* series.

Major Havoc 1983
This coin-op was notable for being a vector game with platformer-style gameplay sections.

Pac-Land 1984
The side-scrolling platformer is ahead of its time, containing popular platformer design elements.

Super Mario Bros 1985
With over 40 million copies sold, this side-scrolling platformer is the most successful game in the series.

Bionic Commando 1987
One of the earliest games to do away with jumping, this focuses entirely on a swinging arm mechanic.

Prince Of Persia 1989
Featuring a deeper narratives and a rotoscoped hero, it popularised the cinematic platformer.

16-BIT
16-BIT
16-BIT

16-BIT GENERATION
MARCH OF THE MASCOTS

From a developer's perspective, platformers provided an easy and effective way to world-build, and so the arrival of more powerful consoles and computers equated to larger and better-looking places for their imaginations to flourish and gamers to explore. *Super Mario Bros* is the game that helped secure the platformer's popularity in the eyes of developers and publishers, and so the platformer boom of this era was inevitable.

With Nintendo making *Super Mario Bros* a pack-in with NES consoles, platformers were also now seen as a good way to sell hardware, too. Therefore, it's also no surprise that the 16-bit console era is dominated by a legendary console war – a conflict that didn't just occur between corporations and machines, but also between two platform game heroes. In one corner, the intrepid plumber Mario, in the other a new challenger in the form of a cobalt-blue hedgehog named Sonic – two very different heroes in two different styles of platformer.

Their rivalry filled the pages of games publications at the time, and resulted in a staggering number of platformers appearing, most featuring cartoon anthropomorphic heroes and gameplay that aped the look and design of *Super Mario Bros* and (to a greater extent) *Sonic The Hedgehog*. Some were good (*Rocket Knight Adventures*, and *Jazz Jackrabbit*), and some enjoyed success (*Bubsy The Bobcat*) but large proportions were uninspired (*Socket*) or dreadful (*Awesome Possum*).

Pointing towards more evidence of the popularity of platformers during this time, some developers even began fusing platform elements into other game genres, and sometimes it proved a recipe for success – DMA Design's *Lemmings* a prime example. Described as a puzzle platformer, Lemmings and games like *The Lost Vikings*, *King Arthur's*

DID YOU KNOW?

- *Castle Of Illusion* is called *I Love Mickey Mouse: Great Mysterious Castle Adventure* in Japan.
- The famous "Segaaa!" chant first sounded in the Mega Drive version of *Sonic The Hedgehog*.
- Luigi and Mario are the same shape in *Super Mario World*, though Luigi is a little leaner in the *Mario All-Stars* version.
- Tails' first appearance was in the Master System version of *Sonic 2*, though his playable debut was in the Mega Drive version.
- 2007 saw rivals Mario and Sonic officially team up in *Mario & Sonic At The Olympic Games*.

» [Mega Drive] *Sonic The Hedgehog* was Sega's answer to *Mario* and a fierce battle between the two has continued ever since.

DAVID PERRY
FOUNDER OF SHINY ENTERTAINMENT

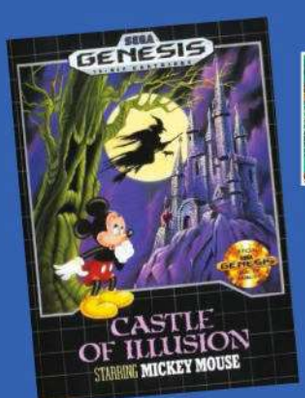
Did you find it easier designing a platform game that was attached to an existing property?
People have this interesting thing where they are magnetically drawn to brands. It doesn't really matter if the game beside it is better, they will still grab the branded game. That said, there are a lot of properties that just won't make good games and that's where things get complicated. So you need to do your research, but when you find a great licence it can actually be quite inspiring and sometimes you get to work with incredible talent.

From a programming and design perspective, what are the pros and cons of a platform game?
The biggest challenge was that there were lots of competitors. Nintendo didn't even make the fight fair, either, as they'd give themselves bigger cartridges and ship at lower prices. In reality, it was a challenging time but it was also a really good time as it made you focus on raising your game. I remember looking at *Sonic The Hedgehog* as a giant kick in the ass. Yuki Naka was basically saying 'You've been coasting, step it up!'" That's really fun when you see someone else innovate in some way, then you feel the pressure to stop taking the easy path.

Shiny achieved what few other studios could in creating a credible platform hero in *Earthworm Jim*, why do you feel the character succeeded where many others failed?
I often wonder if *Angry Birds* would be successful if it was called *The Catapult Game* and didn't have funny voices and exploding feathers. When you look at the thousands of games launched every year, the most under-represented category is 'humour'. It's weird as we all *love* to laugh! It seems to me like the biggest freebie if you design a game... go for humour! People never seem to forget when they laughed at a game as it's a surprisingly rare experience.

Do you think platformers could regain its crown?
No question, it's a great genre, it just needs a fresh approach and plenty of humour, and I bet it would be easy to make another hit platformer. I'm sure an independent team will pull it off.

THE 16-BIT INNOVATIONS



Castle Of Illusion 1990
The first game in the series proved Sega's intention to pay close attention to the platforming genre.

Super Mario World 1990
With 96 levels, new power-ups and a dinosaur pal, it's a chart-topping *Mario* sequel.

Sonic The Hedgehog 1991
Sonic The Hedgehog marks a true demonstration of what 16-bit tech means for the genre.

Lemmings 1991
Capturing the platformer spirit was the excellent genre-straddling puzzle platformer *Lemmings*.

Zool 1992
Zool is one of the earliest examples of a 16-bit 'product placement platformer' featuring Chupa Chups.

Earthworm Jim 1994
This was one of the most successful 16-bit platformers to not come from a hardware manufacturer.

Donkey Kong Country 1994
Rehabilitating DK as a bona-fide hero, this return to form spawned its own successful series.

World and *Push Over* featured platformer elements to draw gamers in.

During the 16-bit generation, another thing happened that further boosted the platformer's prominence. The games being played most by the core teenage demographic that many were trying to target were platformers, so as corporations began seeing games as an outlet to promote their products, a flurry of 8-bit and 16-bit licenced platformers started appearing as a result.

On home computers, you had examples like *Zool* promoting Chupa Chups, *Superfrog* guzzling Lucozade and *James Pond 2: Codename RoboCod* advertising McVities' Penguins, while across the pond, Virgin Interactive and programmer David Perry produced a string of successful examples with hits such *Mick & Mack Global Gladiators* for McDonald's, *Aladdin* for Disney, and *Cool Spot* for 7 Up. Perry's experience within the platform genre would culminate with the game *Earthworm Jim*, a creation by animator Doug TenNapel that David and his studio Shiny Entertainment turned into an award-winning platformer series.

To put into perspective how popular the platformer had become, *Aladdin* was the third bestselling game for the Mega Drive, with *Sonic 2* in second and *Sonic The Hedgehog* taking the top spot. The bestselling Super Nintendo game was *Super Mario World*, followed by *Donkey Kong Country*. The 16-bit generation is the period the platformer ruled. However, like all monarchs, its reign would eventually come to an end.

JAMES HIGGINS

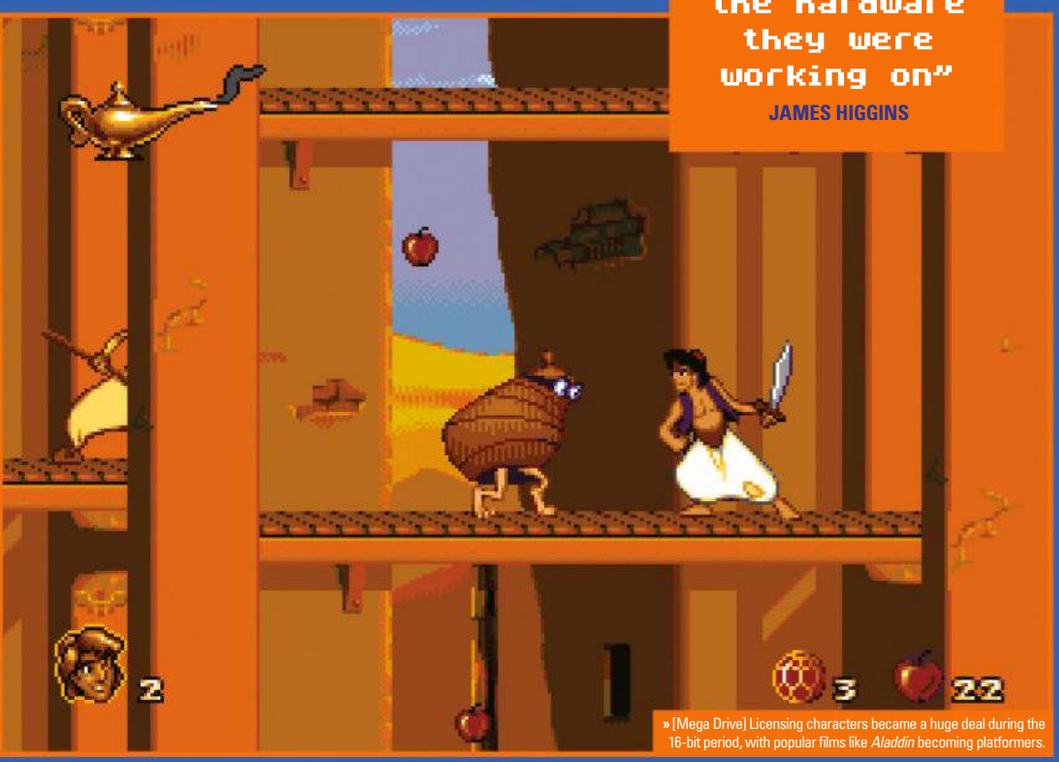
PROGRAMMER ON THE ADDAMS FAMILY

Why do you feel platformers became so popular during the 8-bit and 16-bit eras?
Probably a combination of many things. Programmers became increasingly comfortable with the hardware they were working on, and with the 16-bit generation, the systems had more power/resources allowing developers to break free from the single-screen game and start to scroll stuff around. In a sense, it was a natural evolution of platform game design. Shooters went from single-screen (*Space Invaders*) to scrolling through landscapes (*Scramble*), and similarly, games like *Donkey Kong* evolved into *Pac-Land*. This I think is completely in line with developers pushing their art and consumers becoming increasingly sophisticated with their expectations, too.

From a programming and game design perspective, what were the best aspects of working on a platformer?
The best aspect for me was working in a genre that I enjoyed playing. I don't think there's necessarily a commonality to 'best aspects' of working on a platformer. I'm sure some of the things I thought were best would be considered hellish by other developers. Bringing it all together is the best aspect, and working with a great designer and artist (Warren Lancashire) who pushed me to produce better work mostly through being inspired by what he was trying to achieve.

Having done so with *The Addams Family*, what do you feel are the key ingredients to making a great platformer?
The key ingredients are working with talented people, and iterate, iterate and iterate. *The Addams Family* actually started on Amiga; we switched to the SNES, and threw almost everything away. At that point, we took a lot of inspiration from a certain Italian plumber. Then we spent a long time trying to get the basic controls down – how the player jumped, the distance they jumped and the height. Levels were refined and tweaked until it just flowed. Unusually for the time, we had [Ocean head] Gary Bracey stop by – almost daily – for a few hours and play it before he'd disappear off home and [we would] be left late into the night before we'd have to make a mad dash for the last bus home. That playtesting – whilst still developing – combined with some flexible tools for map building, allowed us to refine and tweak until it was a fun game.

> "Developers became comfortable with the hardware they were working on"
> JAMES HIGGINS



» [Mega Drive] Licensing characters became a huge deal during the 16-bit period, with popular films like *Aladdin* becoming platformers.

Think Fast.
C'mon faster. Because here comes Sonic The Hedgehog.™ He's the fastest critter the world has ever seen, and he's a hedgehog with a major attitude.
Watch him smirk in the face of danger as he blazes his way through hilly pastures, underwater caverns, marble ruins, strange cities and a cybernetic world of enemies in a race to save his buddies.
Sonic's got everything a hedgehog could ever want: tricks, gadgets and speed. So don't blink or you might just miss him. Sonic is sold separately or included when you buy a Sega™ Genesis 16-bit system.
SEGA GENESIS
Leading the 16-bit revolution.™

» Sega meant business with Sonic, as this ad demonstrates.

THE ADDAMS FAMILY

Ocean tried adapting many films into videogame platformers, and *The Addams Family* is probably its best one. Playing close to *Super Mario World*, it garnered rave reviews on its release. It looked great, was packed with levels, had great level design, was nonlinear in design, and there was plenty to discover too.

32-BIT GENERATION
AWKWARD JUMPS AND TURNING 64

The 32-bit era changed the landscape of gaming more than any other, we would argue. It marked something of a seismic change occurring within the industry, one in which 2D worlds, which had been refined over two generations, were fighting against alluring polygonal graphics and impressive 3D worlds.

The problem for platformer-makers was that these worlds were, to begin with, not the best place for graphics and animation-packed platformers to really shine immediately. For those studios that had made their name and invested heavily in 2D gaming up to this point, it was like telling a popular and established 2D artist that they would need to start learning sculpting, and fast, if they wished to remain at the front.

This is not to say there aren't some great-looking platformers to have emerged from this era. The Sega Saturn's 2.5D offerings *Clockwork Knight* and *Bug!* certainly captured a colourful aesthetic, and were popular enough to receive sequels. This fence-sitting style of platformer also had a decent presence on PlayStation with the likes of *Pandemonium* and excellent Japanese offerings like *Tomba!* and *Klonoa*. There were also a few stunning-looking pure 2D platformers too, perhaps best exemplified by *Rayman*, which put the extra memory and power of the next wave of consoles to good effect; using the new tech to create giant textures, rich backgrounds and jaw-dropping animations.

One of the earliest 3D platformers to arrive on the PlayStation was *Jumping Flash!*, a unique first-person platformer that saw the player pilot a big robot bunny around a *Pilotwings*-style

DID YOU KNOW?

- *Heart Of Darkness* took six years to create and was the first platformer to have a music score recorded by an orchestra.
- *Croc: Legend Of The Gobbos* was developed by Argonaut Software, of *Star Fox* (SNES) fame.
- Early 2.5D platformer *Bug!* featured a cameo from Sonic The Hedgehog, it sees him challenging players to a race.
- The *Tomba!* series was created by Tokuro Fujiwara, who is best known for being one of the minds behind *Ghouls 'N Ghosts* and producing the early *Mega Man* series.
- *Super Mario, Tomb Raider* and *Prince Of Persia* have all been adapted into big-budget Hollywood movies.
- Lara Croft has been played by actresses Rhona Mitra, Nell McAndrew and Angelina Jolie, and was originally voiced by Shelley Blond.

» [N64] Nintendo's *Super Mario 64* was a revelation for the platform genre, shaping it for many years to come.

» [PC] The third dimension was a testing time for the genre, with many popular 2D franchises failing to capture the magic of their 16-bit days.

THE 32-BIT INNOVATIONS

Geograph Seal
1994
This impressive 3D shooter/platformer from developer Exact is the precursor to *Jumping Flash!*.

Clockwork Knight
1994
Early Saturn 2.5D platformer *Clockwork Knight* carries the *Donkey Kong Country* torch.

Jumping Flash!
1995
Exact refines its first-person platformer concept with *Jumping Flash!*, a game more platformer in design.

Super Mario 64
1996
Super Mario 64 breathes new life into the platform genre and popularises 3D gaming.

Crash Bandicoot
1996
The 3D platformer that mixes side-scrolling with into-the-screen sections was a PlayStation staple.

Tomb Raider
1996
Core Design's cinematic platformer enters 3D with the release of the brilliant *Tomb Raider*.

Banjo-Kazooie
1998
Banjo-Kazooie blends brilliantly elements of *Mario 64* with the co-op elements of *Donkey Kong Country*.

BANJO-KAZOOIE

■ A massive game world – with nine open levels for you to run around in – packed with great characters, beautiful visuals, memorable moments and humour, very few 3D platformers managed to give *Super Mario 64* a genuine run for its money, but Rare managed it with *Banjo-Kazooie*.

» [PC] *Tomb Raider* combined traditional platforming with gunplay to deliver a truly unique experience.

world – a style of platformer that's perhaps most successfully replicated in the form of the free-running *Mirror's Edge*. Interestingly, the company behind *Jumping Flash!*, Exact, released a similar style of game to *Jumping Flash!* the previous year in 1994. Called *Geograph Seal*, it went completely under the radar of many Western gamers by appearing on the Sharp X68000 Japanese home computer.

Working inside a new dimension meant game developers started thinking more about perspective, camera and controls. Part of a 2D platformer's appeal was that they were simple and intuitive, so capturing the 'feel' in 3D would be just as important as nailing the look. Again, Nintendo succeeded in providing the most used roadmap.

Super Mario 64, released in 1996 for the N64, marked another important release for the genre, raising the visual bar and immersive properties of platformers and helping make the genre popular once again. *Super Mario 64* is not solely responsible for the needle shift, though, as this year also saw the release of *Crash Bandicoot* and *Tomb Raider*.

In the mid-to-late Nineties, the 3D platformer enjoyed another fruitful time with releases like *Banjo-Kazooie*, *Spyro The Dragon* and *Donkey Kong 64* strengthening the status of the 3D platformer. Of course, as had happened before in the previous generation, this popularity also attracted rubbish and disappointing offerings. Titles such as *Earthworm Jim 3D* and *Bubsy 3D* proved that an established face counted for little if the games behind them didn't measure up.

As the generation drew to a close the platformer was still enjoying popularity, but it was beginning to show signs of losing its hold. The two best-selling games on Sega Saturn were both arcade conversions (*Virtua Fighter 2* and *Sega Rally Championship*), while the bestselling game on PlayStation was *Gran Turismo*, followed by *Final Fantasy VII*.

And then there was GoldenEye on N64. A real game-changer, this seminal FPS title introduced console gamers to the fun that could be had from having virtual gunfights with friends – something that PC gamers had been experiencing for years. The console FPS seed had been firmly planted in this generation, and as the flower bed became more crowded, the platform landscape began to look less rosy. ▶

> "Any game where you fully interact with a 3D background can trace its roots back to Mario 64"
> GREGG MAYLES

» [PlayStation] *Crash Bandicoot* was a big success for Naughty Dog and received a string of sequels.

GREGG MAYLES

DESIGNER ON DONKEY KONG COUNTRY AND BANJO-KAZOOIE

How important do you feel *Super Mario 64* was to platformers?
At the risk of sounding like yet another spin of this record played endlessly throughout the industry, it was one of those seminal moments. Looking beyond the obvious technical accomplishment, as a designer I was stunned (and in awe) that [Nintendo] had discarded the staple need for pixel-perfect precision of every *Mario* game to date and replaced it with looser playful control, lazy pace and something that felt more like a story-driven adventure. I also believe that *Mario 64*'s importance and legacy goes beyond platform games. Any game where you fully interact with a 3D background (eg *Assassin's Creed* and the *Drake* games) can trace its roots back to *Mario 64*.

What did 3D and the N64's power allow you to achieve over the previous generation?
We were able to create more believable words (you don't view the real world in 2D) that had a sense of space and scale. Now we could have things that were as big as real life or even larger! The emotions that could be evoked in these environments was also a major advancement. It's something we tried to use in *Banjo* a lot – the vertigo standing on top of a really high point, the claustrophobia of being in a small dark space and the sheer childlike joy of running through a field.

What problems do you have to consider when making 3D platformers?
Probably the biggest problem is being able to judge height and distance accuracy. Humans view the real world in 3D via two eyes, but 3D environments in (current) games are being displayed on a 2D screen. It's a bit like walking around in the real world with one eye closed – try it! So you have to allow for this in what you ask of the player. Another issue is working out what people can and can't see of the environment, or more importantly what you want them to see – how you use the environment to hide, introduce or highlight different areas for different reasons.

Do you think the platform genre could ever regain its popularity seen in the Eighties and Nineties?
I do think gamers' tastes have changed and widened dramatically, with the popularity crown having been firmly wedged on shooters' heads for last decade and a half. I'm sure there will always be a place for them – as they offer a combination of excitement, exploration and fun not matched by any other genre.

THE MODERN ERA

ENTER THE INDIES

DID YOU KNOW?

- *Mario* continues to be a huge money-maker for Nintendo. *Super Mario Odyssey* shifted over 23.93 million units.
- Naughty Dog wanted a change for later *Jak And Daxter* games and shifted design into something akin to *Grand Theft Auto*.
- Watch *Indie Game: The Movie* to get a better insight into how and why indie developers make the games they do.
- *Fez* was an epic two-man project by Phil Fish and Renaud Bédard, funded by the Canadian government. A sequel was planned but was cancelled by Fish.
- Sony's *Astro Bot* series is used to demonstrate its hardware, however *Astro Bot Rescue Mission* is an excellent standalone title and demonstrated how well platforming design can work in virtual reality.

As the 128-bit generation began platformers continued to struggle, losing precious ground to the ever-popular FPS. *Super Mario 64* also proved problematic, casting a huge shadow many later platformers were unable to escape from. Don't believe us? Then look at the few innovations to the genre that were introduced during the period. Sonic may have made the jump to 3D with the Dreamcast's *Sonic Adventure*, but he hardly pushed the envelope in the same way his arch-rival had.

Sequels to other popular platform franchises followed, like *Crash Bandicoot* and *Spyro*, but they continued to suffer from many of the issues that most platformers had struggled with during the previous generation. Even Nintendo wasn't infallible, as while *Super Mario Sunshine* introduced the innovative FLUDD mechanic, it was let down by irritating camera issues at times. There were still gems to be found, particularly *Metroid Prime*, which, like *Tomb Raider* before it, seamlessly blended platforming with shooting and exploration elements, but actual innovation was well hidden.

Naughty Dog's *Jak And Daxter: The Precursor Legacy* created a huge persistent open world that featured virtually no loading and allowed you to finish off half-completed sidequests long after you'd first started them, which greatly made up for its otherwise conventional gameplay. *Prince Of Persia: The Sands Of Time* was another impressive addition to the genre. Building on the cinematic elements that creator Jordan Mechner had no doubt first dreamt of when he had worked on the Apple II original, *Sands Of Time* is important, as, like *Super Mario 64*, it's a 3D platformer that captures the speed and slickness of its 2D counterparts. It's safe to say platformers survived the 128-bit generation, but things were about to take a turn for the better...

In today's market, the gaming landscape is vastly different to what it was in the Eighties, Nineties and Noughts. Where platformers once soared over the competition, they have fallen by the wayside in favour of live-service shooters, RPG-infused open-world epics and competitive esports.

THE 128-BIT INNOVATIONS

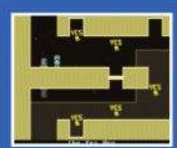
Jak And Daxter: The Precursor Legacy 2001
In additional to its seamless loading, Jak and Daxter's world is persistent, meaning nothing ever resets.

Blinx The Time Sweeper 2002
This early mascot for Microsoft was notable for his ability to manipulate time in a number of ways.

Donkey Kong Jungle Beat 2004
Use the GameCube's *DK* Bongos to control *Donkey Kong*'s movement in this classy platformer.

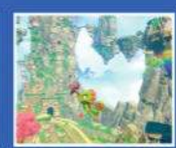
Super Mario Galaxy 2007
Nintendo's first 3D platformer for Wii was jam-packed with imaginative level design.

Mirror's Edge 2008
DICE's beautiful first-person platformer turned parkour (and platforming) into a videogame art form.



VVVVVV 2010
This platformer from Terry Cavanagh takes out the jump button and replaces it with cool gravity-switching.

Fez 2012
A truly clever platformer that cleverly juxtaposes 2D sprites with a hidden third dimension world.



Yooka-Laylee 2017
Former Rare developers banded together to create this 3D platformer in the vein of *Banjo-Kazooie*.

» [PC] *Metroidvania* clone *Cave Story* came first, but *Braid* did a far better jump of marrying independent gaming with innovative game design.

It's not all doom and gloom, though. Nintendo and Mario still enjoy their dominance in the platforming genre, with each *Mario* game bringing exciting innovations to the tried-and-tested formula. Recent highlights include *Super Mario Galaxy* on the Wii and *Super Mario Odyssey* on the Switch, the latter gave us an interesting take on the genre by enabling Mario to take control of his enemies by flinging his cap at them.

Sonic, meanwhile, veers wildly between soaring heights and abysmal lows. Sega's main efforts to inject life into the poor hedgehog tend to fall flat – you need to look no further than *Sonic Unleashed* or *Sonic Forces* for examples. However, by handing control over to indie developers for the side-scrolling retro-flavoured remix *Sonic Mania*, Sega managed to capture that Nineties magic which made the blue blur so popular.

> "Indie developers know that they have to try new things to stand out"
> DEREK YU

In fact, speaking of indie developers, it's these innovative designers who are pushing the platformer genre to new heights. An initial triple-threat of *Braid*, *Super Meat Boy* and *Fez* during the late Noughts and early Tens injected some much-needed life into the genre. Helmed by Jonathan Blow, Edmund McMillen and Phil Fish respectively these games innovated in the way they approached the genre' *Braid* played with the concept of time, *Super Meat Boy* brought insane difficulty into the mix, while *Fez*'s use of perspective was mind-bending. The late Noughts also saw the debut of Derek Yu's *Spelunky*, a brutally tough-as-nails platformer that married the popular genre to the equally ancient roguelike and finished it off with delightful old-school visuals.

This resurgence led to a full-on renaissance for platformers, even bringing back familiar faces and veteran developers. A remaster of the PlayStation *Crash Bandicoot* trilogy became a runaway success, topping charts for months and providing a much-needed defibrillator strike for the broken and battered marsupial. A sequel arrived in 2020: *Crash Bandicoot 4: It's About Time*, which was a delightful retro throwback while bringing in some innovations – a formula usually reserved for *Mario* sequels.

Meanwhile, former Rare employees banded together to form Playtonic Games, creating a *Banjo-Kazooie*-like crowdfunded platformer, *Yooka-Laylee*. While the game itself had its flaws, it was an enjoyable throwback and created a new franchise for the newfound studio.

Thanks to indie dev superstars, the platformer has found a new place in gaming. The genre might not be the all-encompassing juggernaut of its heyday but instead, it leads a new vanguard of innovation like it captured in its heyday.

Sonic Mania
2017
Sega let Sonic ROM hackers and fangame designers loose on this triumphant return to form.

Celeste
2018
This thoughtful classic is a sublime journey of self-discovery... and provides a steep challenge.

Crash Bandicoot 4
2020
This sequel was born from a successful remaster of the trilogy, marking the full return of the Bandicoot.

DEREK YU

CREATOR OF SPELUNKY

Why do you think so many indie platformers take their style from retro games?
This is mainly true for freeware indie games, since many commercial platformers use painted artwork or 3D graphics. But as for why retro platformers are so popular in general... I think it's a combination of easiness and nostalgia. Nice NES or Commodore 64-style pixel art [is] doable even if you're not the best artist.

Many saw the 16-bit era as the best time for platformers. Why do you think this was?
That was a time when the very best designers and programmers in the industry were working on them. These days fewer professionals are working on platform games.

Why do you think there is more innovation in indie platformers compared to mainstream?
In all honesty, there are more indie developers working on platformers these days and they know that they have to try new things to stand out. They cannot rely on a well-known brand.

Why do you think platformers are nowhere near as popular as they used to be?
The advent of 3D gaming is what did it – the focus moved from 2D side-scrolling titles to 3D first and third-person titles, and that's where so much of the talent went. Thankfully, platformers are still alive thanks to indie game development and high profile characters like Sonic and Mario. It's still a wonderful genre that deserves good games. I think the glory days of platformers are over, but that doesn't mean it's dead by any means.

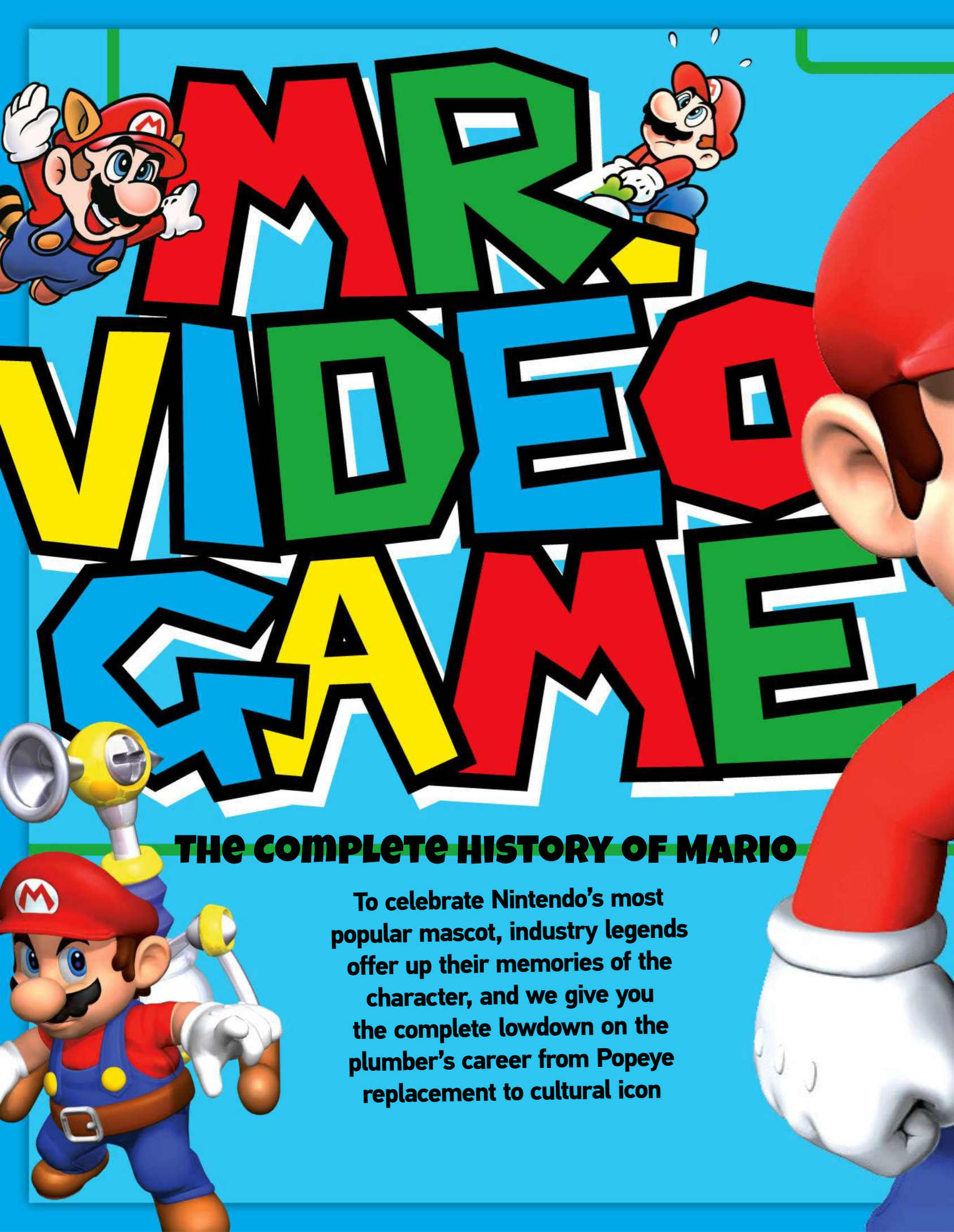
What do you feel are the best example of indie platformers and why?
My favorite indie platformers are *Dustforce*, *Cave Story*, *Braid*, *Super Meat Boy*, *VVVVVV*, *Ninja Senki*, and *Nikujin*. I also really like *Samurai Gunn*. And if I may, I feel that my own platformer, *Spelunky*, is worth mentioning! People seem to enjoy it, at the very least.

SPELUNKY

Derek Yu has made several platformers in his career, but *Spelunky* is easily his best. It's a fantastic game that combines traditional platforming with the hardcore difficulty of the Rogue genre. The end result is an amazingly brutal game with finely honed gameplay that constantly pulls you back for one more go.

» [PC] Indie developers are typically the innovators of the genre nowadays. This is the brilliant *Inside*.

» [PC] *Prince Of Persia: The Sands Of Time* was a huge cinematic jump for the genre, taking narration to a whole new level.



THE COMPLETE HISTORY OF MARIO

To celebrate Nintendo's most popular mascot, industry legends offer up their memories of the character, and we give you the complete lowdown on the plumber's career from Popeye replacement to cultural icon

T

o fully appreciate why Mario is still the videogame industry's most recognised, popular and enduring character, you have to look back to the early days of videogames. Mario remains the poster child for a time where everything about them felt fresh, innovative and new, and these newfangled virtual worlds sought only to be linked to ours through the computers and consoles that projected them, and the talented visionaries who imagined them. With realism and trends now sitting where fun and creativity once ruled, today's industry is looking a much different place to one that Nintendo was helping to build back in the Eighties.

With every familiar-looking sandbox RPG-lite open world game that finds release, it becomes ever apparent that this industry has, in many ways, began to hit critical mass. The insane budgets required to build the games of today mean that now only a small handful of developers and publishers have the financial means to call the shots, game genres seem to be melding together, and despite now being able to utilise gazillions of colours, a lot of mainstream games are looking a little ubiquitous. Why Nintendo's Switch suddenly rocketed into success in 2017, and *Super Mario Odyssey* has scooped universal acclaim, should be obvious to anyone who enjoyed playing videogames throughout the Eighties and Nineties. Nintendo has proven, once again, that fun and creativity are king.

It's for this reason why most gamers can instantly recall the first time they ever saw Mario in action. He takes them back to an evergreen era for videogames, a time with which he has now become synonymous. If you're a retro gamer reading this, we suspect that your first experience came from playing *Donkey Kong* in arcades, or on home computers and consoles. At this inaugural point in his career, Mario was known by the more literal-sounding name of Jumpman, played a bit of an antihero and worked as a carpenter instead of the heroic plumber we all know him as today. However, while Mario's personality, name and occupation would come to change quite quickly following his gaming debut in 1981, the distinct look of the character was settled on almost immediately by his creator, Shigeru Miyamoto, and has only really ever been refined, never changed, over the years.

As was the practice in the early days of game design, Mario was borne out from the technical limitations of his time. The character was given his signature flat cap owing to the fact that it would save Miyamoto the headache of animating hair, a large nose to make him look instantly more human, bright red coveralls to help him stand out against *Donkey Kong*'s dark backgrounds, and a moustache instead of a mouth for similar reasons. But Mario's creation also came about through an element of luck and good fortune – although it probably didn't seem that way to Nintendo at the time.

Super Mario Highlights

1985 SUPER MARIO BROS

1986 SUPER MARIO BROS THE LOST LEVELS

1988 (USA) SUPER MARIO BROS 2

1988 SUPER MARIO BROS 3

1989 SUPER MARIO LAND

1990 SUPER MARIO WORLD

1992 SUPER MARIO LAND 2: 6 GOLDEN COINS

1995 SUPER MARIO WORLD 2: YOSHIS ISLAND

1996 SUPER MARIO 64

2002 SUPER MARIO SUNSHINE

2006 NEW SUPER MARIO BROS

2007 SUPER MARIO GALAXY

2011 SUPER MARIO 3D LAND

2013 SUPER MARIO 3D WORLD

2017 SUPER MARIO ODYSSEY

Professions of a plumber

The versatile hero has appeared in a string of occupational cameos for Nintendo over the years...

Carpenter

Donkey Kong 1981

Mario's first ever job was as a mallet-wielding carpenter in *Donkey Kong*. It's likely that his profession was inspired by the everyman-type scenarios on which Nintendo based many of its Game & Watch titles.

Plumber

Mario Bros 1983

After a two-year stint working as a carpenter, Mario turned his talents to plumbing – as well as the odd bit of pest extermination too – for *Mario Bros*. He kept the role for the subsequent *Super Mario Bros* series.

Umpire

Tennis 1984

Mario earned extra cash at weekends working as a tennis umpire. Later in life he decided to take up the sport himself when he realised that more money was to be had playing than interfering.

Referee

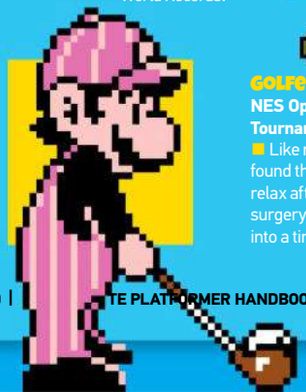
Punch-Out!! 1987

Following a successful spell as a tennis umpire, Mario caught the eye of the Nintendo Boxing Commission and was approached to work as a referee in the Famicom/NES version of *Punch-Out!!*.

Doctor

Dr Mario 1990

Making a mint working as a boxing ref, Mario left labouring to go to medical school. It took him just two years to complete his doctorate – earning him a place in *Guinness World Records*.



Golfer

NES Open Tournament Golf 1991

Like most doctors, Mario found that the best way to relax after a busy day in surgery was to smash a ball into a tiny hole.

Mario memories

Jim Bagley
ZX Spectrum coder

I first saw Mario in the local arcade halls in New Brighton roughly around 1981 when *Donkey Kong* was released. *Donkey Kong* is and always will be a classic, and a great game to boot, but I can't help but admire so many other *Mario* games. *Super Mario Bros* is another fantastic *Mario* game that even to this day I like to play – even though my nephew completed it before I did! And what favourite *Mario* list would be complete without *Mario Kart*? I loved the N64 version the most, because my nephew, niece, sister and I used to play it at the weekends with riotous laughter, especially when zapping someone on the jump in Wario Stadium. And I can't go without saying *New Super Mario Bros*. I also loved it, again, because of the original features, like being able to grow huge and sprint through the level. Out of those four, those being my favourites, if I had to choose one... I'm not sure I can! They all have a huge place in my heart. Why has Mario remained so enduring? Well because he's constantly reinventing himself, changing with the times, and because Shigeru Miyamoto is simply a genius.

John Carmack
Cofounder id Software

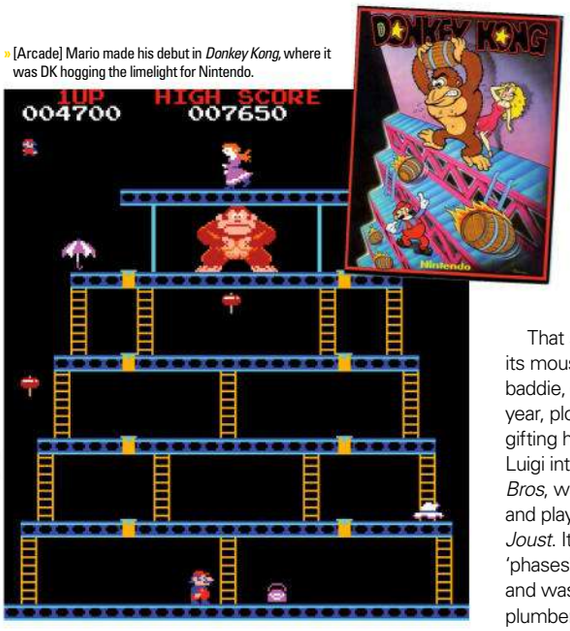
I have followed Mario since the *Donkey Kong* days, and id Software was pretty much launched on the merits of an internal clone of *Super Mario Bros 3*. I was away for a while after *Super Mario 64*, but the last few years with my son have brought me back into the fold – at the time of writing this, we just collected our 66th star on *Super Mario Galaxy 2* last night, and we have gone back through all the old games. Still fun after all these years. Domo arigato, Miyamoto-san!

Kevin Toms
Creator of Football Manager

I remember my first recollection of Mario being on the original Nintendo cartridge machine. Squat, cute character, red hat comes to mind. Probably I would go for *Mario Kart* on the Nintendo 64 as my *Mario* game. His lasting appeal is down to the personality he puts across: an upbeat, likeable, jolly man. Most people would get on with someone like that. So he annoys no one!

[NES] The original *SMB* still plays great today . We should know – we played it yesterday.

» [Arcade] Mario made his debut in *Donkey Kong*, where it was DK hogging the limelight for Nintendo.



Popeye to Plumber

Before *Donkey Kong* was even considered, Shigeru Miyamoto had aims to create a new arcade game starring the characters from the popular King Features Syndicate cartoon *Popeye*. But when Nintendo failed to obtain the licence, Miyamoto was forced to come up with three central characters of his own. And, after taking pretty obvious inspiration from the 1933 stop-motion monster epic, *King Kong*, he came up with the characters Jumpman, Lady and Donkey Kong to substitute the roles of Popeye, Olive Oyl and Bluto, respectively.

When the time came for *Donkey Kong* to ship to North America, however, it was decided that Jumpman should be renamed during the localisation process. Even then, Nintendo's intention was to turn Mario into a mascot-type character by having him appear in many of Miyamoto's subsequent videogames. With this idea in mind, the first new name that Nintendo would settle on for Jumpman was 'Mr Video'. It was a name clearly derived from Nintendo's first ever gaming mascot, Mr Game & Watch.

However, in what became one of the videogame industry's most bizarre anecdotes, Jumpman's name would change once again. The tale goes that, at the time when Nintendo Of America (NOA) was trying to gain a foothold in North America, it was renting a warehouse from an Italian construction tycoon named Mario Segale. Segale was said to have looked remarkably similar to Jumpman, and when NOA's president at the time, Minoru Arakawa, realised the coincidence, Jumpman was nicknamed Mario and the name stuck. What makes the story all the more ironic is the fact that Mario Segale's business was construction, an industry that played a prominent role in the look of *Donkey Kong*'s stages. It can not be neither confirmed nor denied whether Mario Segale once owned a giant gorilla that would occasionally kidnap loved ones, though it's easy to guess that it was highly unlikely.

With the hero character renamed, Lady rechristened Pauline, and the localisation process complete, Nintendo pushed *Donkey Kong* out onto the US market, where it became a huge, runaway success. And with the millions of dollars it earned, the company was able to better fund development of its first true videogame console, the Famicom. But it was Donkey Kong, not Mario, who was gaining the most celebrity for Nintendo. Despite the fact that the big angry ape was assigned the role of big dumb antagonist in *Donkey Kong*, his domineering presence and cartoon qualities made him a clear standout character in the game. And it is perhaps for this reason why Mario was then made to play villain in the game's 1982 sequel, *Donkey Kong Jr.*

That said, Nintendo, obviously not wanting to turn its moustached hero character into an out-and-out baddie, did give Mario his very own game in the same year, plonking him back in the saddle of hero and gifting him a green coverall-wearing brother called Luigi into the bargain. The game in question, *Mario Bros*, was a single-screen action platformer that looked and played similar to the earlier Williams arcade game *Joust*. It saw Mario and his brother battle through 'phases' of enemy attacks inside a New York sewer, and was the first game to ever depict the brothers as plumbers – it's believed that this was done simply to explain the game's culvert setting. However, with its premise finding the pair trying to prevent an infestation of insect and reptilian pests escaping into the city, the brothers are clearly acting more like exterminators in the game. Nevertheless, as well as portraying the brothers as plumbers, *Mario Bros* also introduced a few common enemy types too, such as Shellcreepers – a precursor to Koopa Troopas – and the spike-shelled foes, the Spinies. It also established the idea of having the brothers collect coins through bonus rounds, as well as the concept of brick-punching and unconscious enemy kicking, all of which would become staples of the *Mario* series.

Mario Bros received a lukewarm arcade reception, certainly nothing in the same league as *Donkey Kong*, but it later proved to be a popular release for the Nintendo Entertainment System console in North America. Two variants of the game were also developed by Hudson Soft, under licence from Nintendo. Released exclusively on Japanese home computers, the games featured all-new original stages and gameplay mechanics. The first, *Mario Bros Special*, was an interesting update of the original game that saw players having to fight their way to exit points at the top of each stage, while the second title, *Punch Ball Mario Bros*, was a quirky dodgeball-inspired iteration that saw the brothers punching balls at their subterranean foes and hitting switches. Hudson Soft also later released its own version of *Super Mario Bros*. Titled *Super Mario Bros Special*, this unfairly punishing home computer version featured all-new levels, hair-pulling level design and maddening flick-screen scrolling. In fact, the dodgy scrolling hurts the experience so much that it shows just how important a factor scrolling actually played in *Super Mario Bros*' ultimate success.

» [NES] Who can forget this trick in World 1-2? Who was it that said cheating doesn't pay? Someone who'd never played *Super Mario Bros*, clearly.

But we're jumping ahead of ourselves a little bit here, as Mario hadn't quite gone 'super' just yet. In fact, while it's debatable that Shigeru Miyamoto dabbled with the idea of giving Mario enhanced powers in the *Mario Bros* arcade game by finally giving him the ability to survive a large fall – he wasn't capable of bending his knees in *Donkey Kong* – it wasn't really until the release of *Super Mario Bros* in 1985 that the legendary game designer gave his creation actual super powers. Before reaching this watershed moment, however, the character could be seen busily living up to his 'Mr Video' duties. The multipurpose handyman could be seen popping up in a bonus stage in the NES game *Pinball* that same year, guest appearing as an unshaven umpire in *Tennis* (1984), and influencing the look of *Golf*'s (1984) moustachioed golfer Ossan, a character often mistaken for Mario, owing to his stark resemblance to Nintendo's mascot.

Mario Memories

Eugene Jarvis
Creator of Defender

My first recollection of Mario was in *Donkey Kong*. The character was ridiculous. Why am I a carpenter trying to rescue a princess from King Kong? *Super Mario Bros* is the greatest videogame of all time. It is etched in my brain like a phosphorescent cattle brand. Mario is the video star. He has been flogged and baked into the collective memory of humanity for over 30 years. When the last cockroach is dead, he will dance on the grave.

Jamie Woodhouse
Creator of Qwak!

I'm fairly sure my first experience of Mario was *Mario Bros* on the NES; I remember it not scrolling, just a static screen, with lots of turtles that go into pipes in the bottom corners of the screen, then coming out of pipes in the top corners. Characters were all simple, yet fun-looking, with a cutesy round feel to them. I think my all-time favourite *Mario* game is probably *Super Mario Land* on the Game Boy: simple, fun gameplay, not too complicated graphically, and of course, it was portable! I think maybe Mario's appeal is down to the personality of the character; I mean, he's not really a violent kind of dude, is he? And he's only there in the first place because he's trying to sort out the big bad boss or rescue his girlfriend – or was that the other game, the one with the big monkey? So I guess, maybe because he's not too violent, and he's there for a good reason, people maybe relate to that. Also, it can't hurt having the Nintendo marketing department on your side!

MR. VIDEOGAME

MARIO MEMORIES

Jon Hare
Cofounder Sensible Software

First time I saw Mario was *Donkey Kong* in the arcades in about 1980. I didn't focus on the character much, to be honest – nothing that special. I thought the monkey was the best thing in the game. My all-time favourite *Mario* game has to be *Mario Golf* on the N64. It just has the most perfectly tuned learning curve ever. I spent a whole year trying to win every trophy and kept missing the final one by just one shot. Next best titles would be *Mario 64* and *Mario Kart*. I think Mario endures because he is a really good everyman character, funny but not too irritating, and he has an army of fellow characters that add a lot to him. Miyamoto is the only game designer that I look up to.

MARIO MEMORIES

Scott Miller
Founder of Apogee Software

I first remember Mario playing *Donkey Kong*, of course! When I first discovered this game in an arcade I knew it had something special about it, interesting characters, unique gameplay, variety, and it was a deeply polished game. From the get-go I knew it was the start of a new era, but no one could have guessed the staying power of this squatty plumber!

[Famicom] If you think this game looks a lot like *SMB2*, that's because 95% of it is.

Alex Trowers
Former designer, Bullfrog Games

I suppose the first time I saw Mario in action was in *Super Mario Bros*, but that's only because the Mario in *Donkey Kong* was called Jumpman. I found *SMB* a bit 'meh' – despite the knocking-things-over-from-underneath mechanic and a two-player option, the whole thing felt a little repetitive. I loved *Donkey Kong* in the arcades, though, and the ColecoVision version, which was the scene of some epic high-score battles between my brother, my mum and I. I can also remember a version of *Super Mario 3* on an old Nintendo Play Choice 10 machine in a local kebab shop. That was entertaining. Suddenly, Mario could do all manner of interesting things and that was quite appealing. My favourite *Mario* game is a toss-up between *Super Mario World* on the Super Famicom and *Super Mario 64* on the N64. Some guys from Imagineer brought a Super Famicom over around the time of the Japanese launch and lent it to us. It had two games: *F-Zero* and *Super Mario World*. We played them both pretty religiously, to the extent that we managed to overheat and blow up the console.

Super Mario World was one of the first games I completed in Japanese despite there being a whole ton of stuff that Mario could do. I couldn't read any of the hints, meaning I missed the one about being able to throw shells up in the air. This meant that to complete the final boss, I had to get the cape on an earlier level and make it through the last castle without getting hit. Once at the boss stage, I had to wait on one side of the screen for him to drop a Koopa before running along, jumping, hitting the thing and grabbing the shell all in one go before using the momentum to fly up to the top of the screen and dropping the shell on him from above. I remember thinking it was a bit tricky at the time but I put it down to just being the end of the game.

John Romero
Cofounder of id Software

The first time I saw Mario in action, I was at an arcade in Roseville, California, called Supercade. It was a weekend in 1981 and my friend Robert was with me. At this time in 1981, new games were showing up every week. The arcades were the most exciting places in the world. And in this particular arcade, this particular weekend, was a new game called *Donkey Kong*. We went up to the game, dropped in our quarters, and lost ourselves for several hours. When the smoke cleared, we had found a new favourite game and a favourite carpenter named Jumpman, who would be renamed in four years to the familiar name: Mario. We loved Mario's pixellated figure, his cute animations and cuter sound effects. His job was to rescue the princess and put out fire with a mallet. We loved the ridiculousness of it, and it fit in perfectly with the extreme abstractness of games of that time. For me, *Super Mario 3* was the pinnacle. It was just so epic. That game pushed the original NES to the extreme. The cartridge was packed to the limit with data – the game was huge at the time. And it took a while to play through. I was playing it in my Gamer's Edge office next to John Carmack as he coded.

GROWING UP

Super Mario Bros was, in many respects, the natural next step for the main series to take. It took the popular 'rescue the lady in distress' premise of *Donkey Kong*, applied it to the theme and two-player mode – albeit not simultaneous this time – introduced in *Mario Bros*, and then stretched the gameplay into a revolutionary side-scrolling platform game. Set in the fantasy fungal world of the Mushroom Kingdom, the 'Super' prefix came from the brothers' peculiar reaction to ingesting magic mushrooms, which took the form of power-ups in the game. Obtaining a mushroom would cause Mario and Luigi to grow in size, this growth spurt essentially acting like a shield but at the cost of making the heroes easier to hit. And while in this state the eating of a Fire Flower power-up would make the plumbers truly super-powered, dressing them in lustrous white overalls and giving them the ability to lob fireballs around the environment.

Speaking in 1991's *Mario Mania Player's Guide*, Miyamoto revealed how the brothers' iconic growth spurt ability came about: "We developed programming techniques that allowed us to create a larger character than we originally thought possible. At first, we planned to make the game so that the player was always 'big' Mario, but eventually, we came up with the idea for the power-up mushroom to make Mario 'Super'."

Super Mario Bros was praised for its innovative gameplay, great visuals, catchy music, super-smooth scrolling, and wealth of secrets to discover – the most notable of which saw Mario actually breaking out of the level's boundaries in World 1-2 – a truly mind-bending concept at the time, made even more impressive by the fact that doing so rewarded the player with the opportunity to warp to later levels in the game.

Selling over 40 million copies, *Super Mario Bros*' popularity can be largely attributed to the success of the Famicom/NES, and thus for also playing a key role in helping to resurrect the console industry in North America following its crash in 1983. In fact, *Super Mario Bros* currently stands as the sixth best-selling videogame of all time, topped only by the likes of massive modern hits like *Grand Theft Auto V* and *Minecraft*, demonstrating the sheer impact that this single game had on the games industry.

But *Super Mario Bros* wasn't the only *Mario* title released in 1985. The little-known NES game *Wrecking Crew* saw Mario continue in the tradition of his earlier arcade-style games. Rearmed with his trusty carpenter's hammer, and accompanied by Luigi, the game was a fun mix of smash-'em-up and puzzle game. Capping the brothers' ability to jump, *Wrecking Crew* saw Mario and Luigi race around, smashing bricks and pillars in an advantageous order so as to

clear each stage of everything destructible. It even came with a level designer. But while a neat concept, it fell into obscurity in the shadow of *Super Mario Bros.*

Panic Stations

Now if there's one thing that Nintendo was seen to struggle with during the 8-bit era, it was sequels. While *Donkey Kong Jr* was an enjoyable enough successor, it really wasn't a patch on the tight, engaging and insanely addictive gameplay of *Donkey Kong*. And while *Zelda II: The Adventure Of Link* had its good moments, to this day it's still deemed by many fans to be one of the weaker entries in the series. The *Super Mario Bros* series is no different and follows this peculiar pattern.

Owing to *Super Mario Bros*' success, Nintendo was understandably keen to capitalise on the game's popularity and so quickly pushed out an expert version exclusively for the Famicom Disk System to satiate demand. Released in 1986 as *Super Mario Bros 2* in Japan, it was a single-player game only, with players given the choice of picking between a 'Mario game' or 'Luigi game', and the brothers were given different attributes: Mario had better traction; Luigi a higher jump. On top of this, the difficulty level was also increased, and the game made more challenging through the inclusion of poisonous mushrooms and more aggressive enemies. But when the game came to ship to North America, NOA stressed its concerns that the game wasn't different enough to be deemed a true sequel, and would be too challenging for western gamers. Consequently, Nintendo was forced to do some rapid troubleshooting, and this led it to re-skin another platform game by Miyamoto and his team titled *Yume Kojo: Doki Doki Panic*.

Released for the Famicom Disk System in Japan, *Doki Doki* garnered modest sales, likely owing to its Disk System exclusivity, and so Nintendo had the brainwave of switching the game's four heroes with Mario, Luigi, Toad and Princess Toadstool (Peach) and repackaging it as *Super Mario Bros 2* in the west. Without the aid of the internet back then, a very large proportion of the planet would be none the wiser of this cheeky game swap. Of course, we later got the chance to test our skills on the Japanese sequel when it was remade as *Super Mario Bros: The Lost Levels* for the 1993 *Super Mario All-Stars* compilation pack on the Super Nintendo.

To tie everything together, *Doki*'s story was altered to explain away all the crazy leftovers – something about Mario entering a dream world called Subcon to defeat an evil frog overlord to free some enslaved fairy kids – and the game switch also explains why many of the enemies in the game never reappeared in subsequent *Mario* games, and Mario and pals' peculiar new attack method, which ditches head-stomping to see them instead pick up objects and enemies and toss them at other enemies.

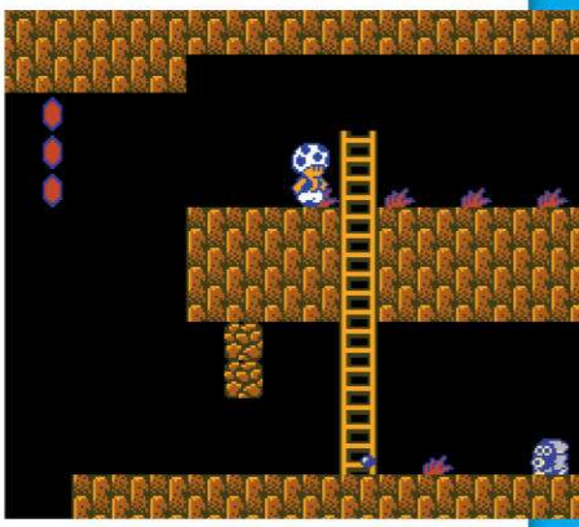
Released in the US in 1988, the re-skinned *Doki Doki* version of *Super Mario Bros 2* became a hot seller for the NES, becoming the third-bestselling game on the console, trading more copies than *The Legend Of Zelda*. And owing to its success, this version was later released in Japan in 1992 under the name *Super Mario USA*.

"Mario played a key role in resurrecting the American industry"

Superstar Mario Bros

Towards the end of the Eighties, *Mario*-mania was starting to take effect, and its momentum was to be fuelled even further with the release of a game that many fans still consider to be the best game in the series. Taking two years to create, *Super Mario Bros 3* introduced more staples to the *Mario* series than any sequel before or since. It introduced elements such as an overworld map, complete with patrolling enemies that whisked the player to battle screens; enjoyable diversions by way of photo-fit minigames; multiple routes through the game's eight massive worlds; new power-ups in the form of abstract costumes for the brothers; an inventory that allowed you to carry over items obtained in one stage into another, and more secrets than you could shake a Warp Whistle at.

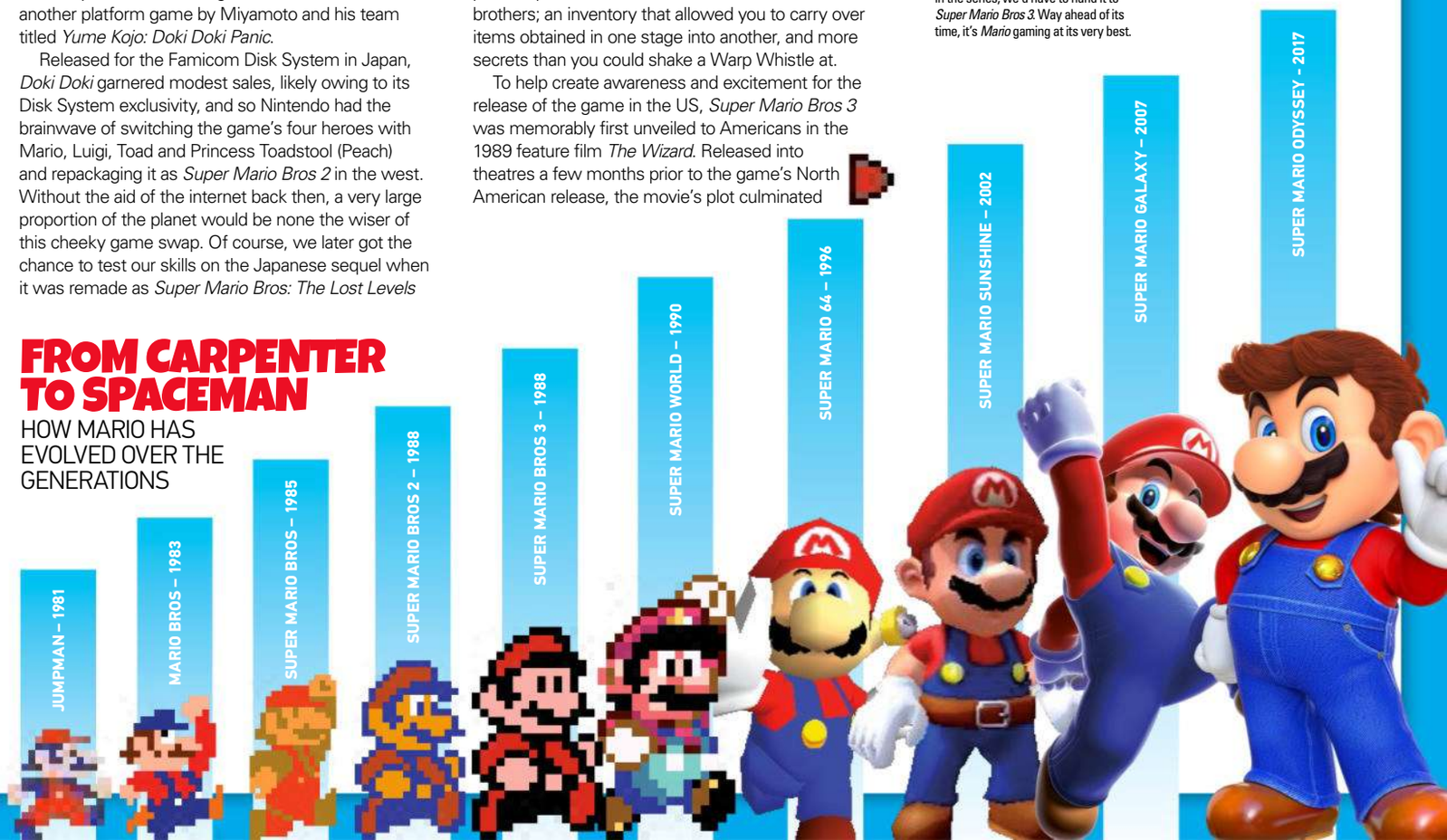
To help create awareness and excitement for the release of the game in the US, *Super Mario Bros 3* was memorably first unveiled to Americans in the 1989 feature film *The Wizard*. Released into theatres a few months prior to the game's North American release, the movie's plot culminated



» [NES] If we had to pick the best game in the series, we'd have to hand it to *Super Mario Bros 3*. Way ahead of its time, it's *Mario* gaming at its very best.

From carpenter to spaceman

HOW MARIO HAS EVOLVED OVER THE GENERATIONS


JUMPMAN – 1981
MARIO BROS – 1983
SUPER MARIO BROS – 1985
SUPER MARIO BROS 2 – 1988
SUPER MARIO BROS 3 – 1988
SUPER MARIO WORLD – 1990
SUPER MARIO 64 – 1996
SUPER MARIO SUNSHINE – 2002
SUPER MARIO GALAXY – 2007
SUPER MARIO ODYSSEY – 2017

MR. VIDEOGAME

» [SNES] The colourful *Super Mario World* stuck close to the *SMB3* template.

MARIO MEMORIES

Gary Bracey Software manager, Ocean Software

I spent quite some time in the early Eighties playing in the arcades, and so my first actual introduction to Mario was *Donkey Kong*. I recall he was the first 'human' character I had seen in games, as all others were cartoon or abstract like *Space Invaders* and *Pac-Man*. My next major encounter was when Ocean obtained the rights to convert the first *Mario Bros* platformer, which was an okay game. However, when I discovered *Super Mario Bros* on the NES, I was completely blown away and spent many, many weeks playing it to completion... and then playing it again! It's one of the few franchises that has never suffered from compromise. Nintendo recognises this and *Zelda* to be its bar-setting titles, and also its console-shifting games. If they released a sub-par version then not only would the whole perception of the franchise suffer, but it would probably impact sales of the hardware. As for the character itself, he is as synonymous with Nintendo as Mickey Mouse is to Disney, yet a lot more contemporary. Over the years, they have managed to develop his personality to keep pace with the advances in console technology, so from the original few pixels there is now a 'fleshed out' character with personality and charisma. From my own perspective, Mario is a reason alone to purchase any new Nintendo console, and I can think of no greater compliment to pay.

Trip Hawkins
EA founder

Naturally, my first time seeing Mario was *Donkey Kong* in an arcade in Silicon Valley, many years ago. Miyamoto-san is the best game designer in the history of the industry, and Mario's appeal is ubiquitous.

in a Nintendo videogame tournament that ended with the finalists competing on a mysterious 'new game', which is revealed to be *Super Mario Bros 3*. Probably at the request of Nintendo, the game is hilariously unveiled in the film as if it were the single most brilliant objet d'art in the history of mankind. Although in hindsight we should let Nintendo off a little, as it actually comes pretty darn close.

But that wasn't all in the way of *Mario* marketing that year, as 1989 also spawned an animated/live action television show: *The Super Mario Bros Super Show.* The programme was an odd format that comprised a short ten-minute cartoon bookended by a peculiar live-action sitcom, in which Luigi was played by actor Danny Wells and Mario by former professional WWF wrestler Captain Lou Albano. Filmed in front of a probably perplexed studio audience, the show saw the pair conversing with drop-in celebrity guests from inside their dilapidated New York apartment, and in some episodes dress up in women's clothes to portray female versions of Mario and Luigi named Marianne and Luigeena. And if you think that sounds like a bizarre idea for a *Mario Bros* television show, during the holiday season of 1989 and 1990, Southern Californians witnessed *King Koopa's Kool Kartoons*, a live-action Krusty The Clown-type kids' telly show in which a guy dressed as Bowser presented cartoons to a room full of children, fondly referred to in the show as 'Koopa Troopas'.

1989 also marks the release of the Game Boy and saw Mario lose the pounds for his first proper portable adventure, *Super Mario Land*. A launch title for the Game Boy in Japan and North America, *Super Mario Land* was overseen by the *Donkey Kong* codesigner and *Metroid* and *Kid Icarus* producer, Gunpei Yokoi, and his solo involvement in the game resulted in a unique *Mario* title for the handheld. Putting his own stamp on the series, head-stomping Koopa Troopas now turned them into ticking time bombs, while striking some enemies in the game transformed them into a pile of decomposing bones. And elements of Yokoi's earlier work also found their way subtly into the game, such as a subterranean-style stage reminiscent of *Metroid* (Level 3-4) and the game ending with a side-scrolling shooter stage that saw Mario piloting a plane – a similar closing stage also occurred in *Kid Icarus*. Likely owing to Mario's popularity and the Game Boy's high hardware sales, *Super Mario Land* became a hugely successful *Mario* title, going on to sell more than 14 million units. It also spawned two sequels: *Super Mario Land 2: 6 Golden Coins*, notable for introducing Mario's doppelgänger Wario to the series, and *Wario Land: Super Mario Land 3*, in which the maniacal-looking villain took centre stage as a controllable character, in another first for the series.

The arrival of the fourth generation of consoles was an exciting time. Both the arcade and console markets were thriving, the NES had successfully brought gaming back home in North America, and Sega was officially first off the mark to make inroads into this new 16-bit era of gaming with the Mega Drive. With Mario now a household name, gamers were anticipating the release of Nintendo's next instalment, especially as it was to be launched alongside its newfangled 16-bit games console.

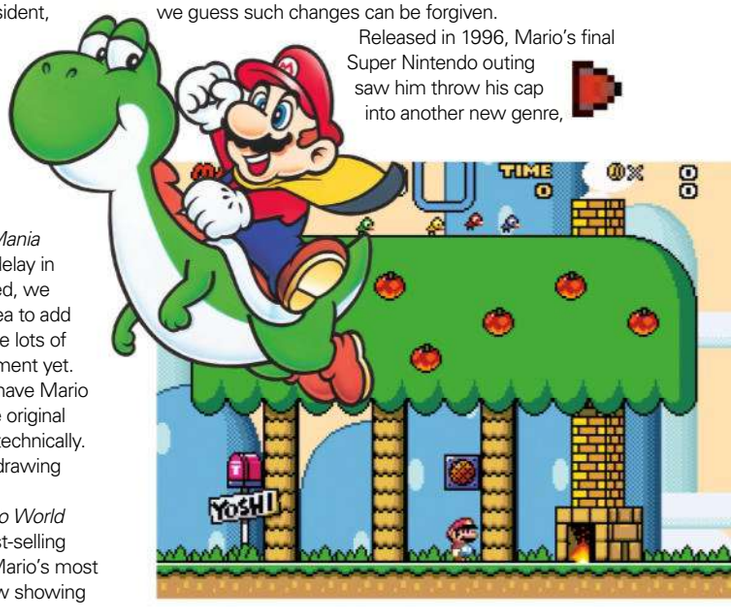
Released in 1990, *Super Mario World* stuck close to the *Super Mario Bros 3* template. Miyamoto and his team set about using the extra technical power of the Super Nintendo to create an enhanced, but not necessarily more innovative, version of the NES classic. Gone were the enjoyable minigames and inventory, and Mario received a new makeover as well as an array of new power-ups, including a yellow cape that afforded him the power of temporary flight, and a lovable green dinosaur companion in the form of Yoshi – a character whose grabbing tongue was possibly inspired by Nintendo's popular Ultra Hand grabbing toy, and whose name could have derived as a portmanteau of Nintendo's then-president, Hiroshi Yamauchi. This is all pure speculation, of course.

Following the release of *Super Mario Bros*, it was Miyamoto's intention to give Mario a dinosaur steed – an idea said to have been inspired by *Excitebike*. In answering a question about how he and his team approached *Mario* sequels in the *Mario Mania Player's Guide*, Miyamoto explained the delay in Yoshi's debut: "Once the game is released, we start thinking it may not be such a bad idea to add another title to the series. We usually have lots of ideas that we haven't been able to implement yet. A good example is Yoshi. We wanted to have Mario ride a dinosaur ever since we finished the original *Super Mario Bros*, but it was impossible technically. We were finally able to get Yoshi off the drawing boards with the Super NES."

Nintendo then followed up *Super Mario World* with *Super Mario Kart*. It became the best-selling racing game on the system, and one of Mario's most successful spin-off series. Mario was now showing himself as a cultural icon, and the versatile face of Nintendo. In fact, his popularity had swelled so much that it was almost a given that the character would pique the interest of film studios wanting to cash in on his celebrity. And so Mario and Luigi did the inevitable, heading to the big screen for a live-action retelling of their videogame antics for the 1993 movie *Super Mario Bros*, plonking actors Bob Hoskins, John Leguizamo and Dennis Hopper in the roles of Mario, Luigi and Bowser respectively. However, for all its promise and hype, the movie, which decides to throw out the colourful *Mario Bros* universe to place the brothers inside some kind of rubbish version of *Total Recall*, tanked at the box office and was branded an unmitigated big-budget failure, and it took three decades for Mario to return to the cinema.

Mario's next big Super Nintendo release came in the form of *Super Mario World 2: Yoshi's Island*. In the game, Mario and Luigi were depicted as babies, with the player now fully assuming the role of a Yoshi and tasked with completing a colourful relay race to get Mario safely to his parents. Of course, given the infant ages of the brothers in the game, *SMW2* is deemed a prequel to the entire *Mario* series. Its story is thus pure retcon, as the game's ending shows the brothers delivered to their parents, who are seen living inside a house in the Mushroom Kingdom. That said, when you remember that before this point we were all accepting of the fact that Mario was the story of a gorilla-abusing carpenter-turned-plumber/pest exterminator who gets whisked away to a mushroom land through a pipe and must then rescue their princess from a giant turtle king, we guess such changes can be forgiven.

Released in 1996, Mario's final Super Nintendo outing saw him throw his cap into another new genre,



"SMB3 was unveiled like the most brilliant objet d'art in history. It's actually close"

Yoshi took centre stage in the sequel to *Mario World*, *Yoshi's Island*.

Steve Lycett
Sumo Digital

Boringly, I'll have to plump for *Super Mario World* as my favourite *Mario* game. I got a SNES for my 18th birthday, and lost weeks of my life hunting down all the hidden exits, completing Star Road and then rinsing it twice for the second credits sequence. An amazing game that's clearly ageing better than I am! I think his appeal simply boils down to quality. Bar the odd exception, if it's got 'Mario' in the title you know you'll be getting something that's been built with love, care and attention to detail, and will provide you with hours of fun. I'll happily buy a *Mario* title without reading a single review. Nintendo will always deliver the goods!

Ralph Baer 'The father of videogaming'

To me, Mario is a living presence. I still have the original NES and the *Duck Hunt*/*Mario* cart that goes with it. Over the decades I have demonstrated interacting physically with the *Duck Hunt* game in the manner of today's Wii games. As has been so often the case, I was 20 years too early with those concepts. Meanwhile, who can resist playing the original *Mario* game when that old TV set is turned on in my demo area and I'm not bringing down those ducks by lobbing something physical at them?

MARIO MEMORIES

Philip and Andrew Oliver
Cofounders of Blitz Software

PO: We first saw Mario appear in the *Donkey Kong* arcade game in 1981. A few years later, in 1988, we went to the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in Las Vegas and were stunned by the magnitude of the games industry and the size of Nintendo's presence. And at the heart of it all was Mario. At that time, *Super Mario Bros* was at its height on the NES – I think they'd sold in the region of 20 million copies, which was incredible.

AO: I remember seeing *Mario Bros* on a Japanese imported NES in about 1986. I remember it looking clean, slick and very playable. And best of all, it was instantly easily accessible. The first time I saw Mario as a character was in the arcade game *Donkey Kong*. Back then he didn't strike me as a brilliant character, but he always starred in brilliant games.

PO: All the Mario games are great. I guess we played the original a fair bit, but it was *Super Mario 64* that proved to the world that character games work better in 3D. Andrew will definitely go for *Mario Kart*, as it's his all-time favourite game! It's up there near the top with me, too.

AO: Mario represents games of brilliant gameplay. He's also had a lot of work done on his 'personality', as the graphical powers of machines have been updated. Each revision has been very skilfully managed and has served to embellish and deepen Mario's qualities – they've been careful never to change his persona fundamentally, so the Mario today is essentially the same guy as the Mario of the Eighties.

Honourable Mentions

Here are some of the more unusual Mario games, which aren't part of the Super Mario canon

MARIO CLASH
VIRTUAL BOY

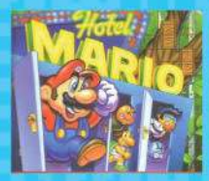
■ This red-looking 3D redux of the original *Mario Bros* coin-op was the first of two *Mario* games released for the Virtual Boy, the other being *Mario Tennis*. It's also the first ever 3D *Mario* game, if you discount *Super Mario Kart*.

ALLEYWAY
GAME BOY

■ Although not really a *Mario* game per se, this decent *Breakout* clone saw Mario piloting the game's bat. You couldn't actually tell this from the in-game graphics, mind, but he's there on the front of the box art, sporting some natty overalls.

MARIO PAINT
SUPER NINTENDO

■ One of the few games to use the Super Nintendo's mouse peripheral, which came as a pack-in with the game, this artistic spin-off allowed budding artists to create drawings, stamps and animations and then set them to sounds using a music generator.



HOTEL MARIO
PHILLIPS CD-I

■ Often cited as being the worst *Mario* game ever. This CD-i puzzle title was a waste product from the messy Super Nintendo CD saga and tasked players with rescuing Princess Toadstool by closing a whole bunch of doors, for reasons never explained.

ALL NIGHT NIPPON SUPER MARIO BROS
FAMICOM DISK SYSTEM

■ This game would be considered one of the most bizarre *Mario* clones to find release, were it not released by Nintendo. This *Super Mario Bros*/*Lost Levels* fusion featured DJs from a popular Japanese radio show.

MARIO EDUCATION GAMES
NES, SNES, PC

■ The plumber also appeared in a series of educational games. These included the geography-themed *Mario Is Missing!*; the typing trainer, *Mario Teaches Typing*; and *Mario's Time Machine*, a thinly veiled history lesson.

SUPER MARIO EXCITEBIKE
SUPER NINTENDO (SATELLAVIEW)

■ Mario and friends appeared in this little-known *Excitebike* title, which meshed together *Mario Kart* with motocross. Released in four parts, it was only available through the Satellaview service.

A FRIENDLY RIVALRY... EVENTUALLY

No feature on Mario would be complete without at least mentioning the epic 16-bit videogame war that Mario played a major part in. During the height of the 16-bit generation, school playgrounds around the globe were divided. One side bound together by a love for a dinosaur-riding Italian plumber named Mario; the other in support for a skittish, edgy and nippy blue hedgehog called Sonic. These two company mascots could scarcely be more different, but together their rivalry spearheaded one of the most exciting periods in gaming ever. With each console generation that passed, their competition softened, until Sega eventually bailed out of the hardware market altogether in 2001. What happened next, no school kid back in 1993 could ever have predicted: Sega started releasing *Sonic* games on Nintendo consoles, starting with *Sonic Adventure 2 Battle* on Nintendo's GameCube. And then two videogame mascots got to finally settle their differences publicly when they appeared together in the game *Mario & Sonic At The Olympic Games* in 2007, followed by the long-awaited chance to beat the crap out of each other in 2008's *Super Smash Bros Brawl*.

MARIO MEMORIES

Martyn Brown Team 17 Founder

Obviously, like many people, I first saw Mario in *Donkey Kong*, but he really played second fiddle to DK. It's amazing to think that Nintendo took the Mario character and threw him into the *Super Mario* world, as it was an anonymous character before then. I wasn't super sure what to make of the first true *Mario* game in terms of character, other than it being brilliantly playable – I was too busy with the Amiga around that time anyway. I think my favourite *Mario* game has to be *Super Mario 64*, the first 3D offering, because it was so incredibly well-considered for its time. I've enjoyed the past games, but they get a bit too hardcore for me. Mario's remained so enduring because he's so charming and a lot of fun. The games are generally so well-balanced to play that it's difficult to get too frustrated and therefore swear at him, although I'm sure it's been done a few times – even by me.

David Braben Co-creator of Elite

I think my first experience of Mario was in a pub, with the original *Donkey Kong*. To be honest I didn't particularly register the character, more the way the game was played, which seemed a little bizarre at the time! *Mario 64* on the Nintendo 64 was the first *Mario* game I really enjoyed playing, as it was, for me at least, less annoying than the previous outings. Later games are great too, but *Mario 64* sticks in my mind the strongest, as for its time it was a great trailblazer. Interestingly, in the days of *Donkey Kong* and *Super Mario Bros* the character image was pretty indistinct and heavily pixelated. Later games featured him as an image, and I think that is when he started to be identified, but *Mario 64* was the first game, I think, that really made a character out of him, for example, when he spoke on the title screen of the game. If anything, especially in the USA, I think he has become the icon of Nintendo. Other factors – like the fact that he seems to run like a toddler does – makes him pretty endearing. He is a pretty nonthreatening character.

[Wii] Mario returned top form following two superb *Galaxy* Wii titles that are literally out of this world.

this time the RPG with the Square-developed *Super Mario RPG: Legend Of The Seven Stars*. The game was a mixture of isometric platform RPG and turn-based battles, and the game's visuals utilised the snazzy ACM graphics techniques seen in *Donkey Kong Country*. But coming late in the Super Nintendo's life, and only released in the US and Japan, it was largely missed by many on its release.

MARIO REACHES 64

Another new console saw another groundbreaking entry in the *Mario* series come, this time in the form of *Super Mario 64* for the N64. Always innovating, Nintendo once again sought to revolutionise the platform genre, and in doing so proved undoubtedly that the creative, fun, engaging and abundant gameplay of previous *Mario* adventures could adapt to a true 3D polygon world unscathed. The N64's analogue controls also worked overtime to further enhance the experience. With a wealth of new acrobatic moves at Mario's disposal, *Mario 64* turned him from portly jumpy plumber into a gaming ballet dancer. Finally, through a series of open-ended levels – all connected by a castle-shaped hub – that unfurled with each revisit, it offered players the chance to really immerse themselves in the colourful and enchanting world of the Mushroom Kingdom. It was truly the gaming equivalent of chasing the rabbit down to Wonderland, and with the inclusion of Mips the rabbit in the game, who spouted dialogue very similar to Lewis Carroll's tardy White Rabbit, this notion was clearly not lost on Miyamoto and his EAD team.

Following the release of *Mario 64*, Mario himself then broke into even more game genres with the first entry in the Hudson-developed *Mario Party* series. And the N64 era also saw Mario return to his NES sporting roots in *Mario Golf* and *Mario Tennis*, before appearing in the first *Super Smash Bros* and making his final 'so long' for the console with *Paper Mario*.

Owing to the early release of *Mario 64* on the N64, it comes as a surprise to many that a sequel was never released on the system. Well, in actual fact, for a time a *Mario 64* sequel was in development, albeit for the 64DD. In 1997 Miyamoto revealed at E3 that work had started on the game. However, following the disastrous launch of the add-on in Japan, and its subsequent poor domestic sales, Nintendo promptly stopped support for the hardware and the game was scrapped.

During Nintendo's Space World event in 2000, the company showcased the power of its brand-new console, the GameCube, with a *Mario* tech demo dubbed *Super Mario 128*. The short demonstration showed a large 2D Mario splintering into 128 smaller versions that ran across the surface of a globe. It showcased, for the first time, the 'sphere-walking' tech that was to be later utilised for *Super Mario Galaxy*.

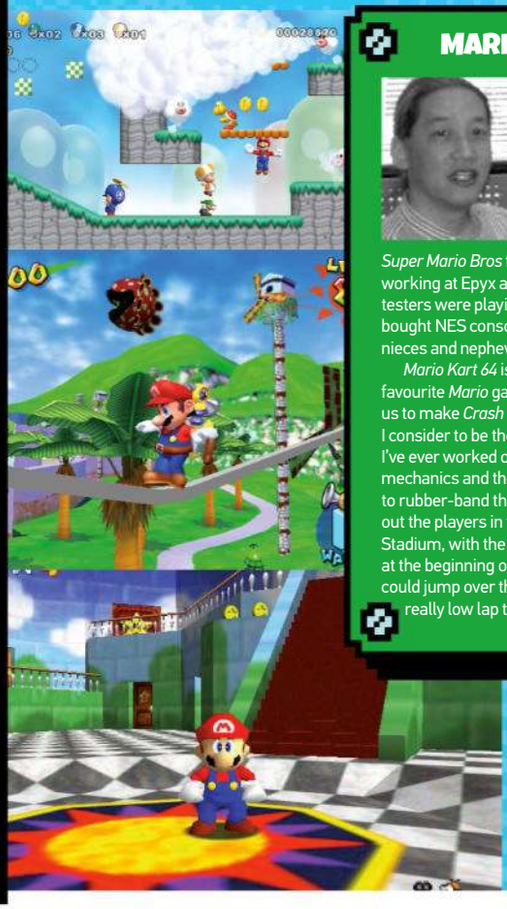
The following year, however, and at the same show, *Super Mario Sunshine* was unveiled to the crowds, and while it shared little likeness to *Super Mario 128*, it was formally announced as the official sequel to *Super Mario 64*. Apart from a story that saw Mario partaking in a spot of community service after the squeaky plumber is forced to clean up the mess left by a muck-spraying imposter, *Sunshine* stuck very close to *Super Mario 64*'s pristine template.

Set in the sun-drenched Isle Delfino, *Sunshine* kept the hub structure of *Mario 64*, and progression still relied on the collection of Shine Sprites. As well as the 3D return of Yoshi, the most novel feature in *Sunshine* came in the form of an odd rucksack armament called FLUDD (Flash Liquidizing Ultra Dousing Device) that Mario could use not only as a cleaning weapon but also as a way to help get around the stages. Clever aiming of the FLUDD's spray nozzles could launch Mario up into the air and even afford him a handy spray-powered speed boost. However, the device quickly became a bone of contention with many fans when they soon discovered that it hindered the responsive control of Mario, and made retrieving stars almost feel like Mario-endorsed physics exercises.

MARIO MEMORIES

Ste Pickford
One half of the Pickford Bros

Definitely *Donkey Kong* in Stockport Arcade, or maybe on holiday in Blackpool or Southport. Of course, I never knew that was actually Mario at the time. I could never get past the second screen, but I must have spent dozens of 10p pieces trying. The first real introduction I had to Mario was at Rare. We had a meeting there in about 1988, and they showed us *Super Mario Bros* on a NES. We must have just screwed our faces up because of how ugly it looked. We were heavily into developing Amiga and Atari ST games at the time, and we had sort of graduated from blocky four-colour graphics to higher res 16-colour graphics with large, non-repeating bitmaps. The Stampers told us to ignore the fact that it didn't look that good, and insisted that we play it because it was better than any Amiga game. We laughed, but I think they lent us a NES with a couple of games, and sure enough, *Super Mario Bros* was brilliant. The irony is that the simple, functional graphics of *SMB* have dated much better than the overworked Amiga graphics of the same period. Without a doubt, my favourite *Mario* game is *Super Mario Bros 3*. We were developing NES games ourselves when it was released and we were just blown away by how much better this game was than anything we were working on at the time. It was at that point that I first began to appreciate what a great designer Mr Miyamoto was, and what a great developer Nintendo is. They were streets ahead of everyone else in the world at that time. That game introduced so many new ideas, and had so much imagination – every new level was surprising and delightful. I don't think that level of consistent invention in one game has been matched by any game since, until *Super Mario Galaxy*, but *Super Mario Bros 3* wins for me because of the big impression it made on me when I was younger.



» [N64] *Mario 64* was a landmark game for the Nintendo mascot, and it set a high benchmark for future 3D games to try to meet.

MARIO MEMORIES

Greg Omi
Atari Lynx progammer

I first saw Mario in *Donkey Kong*, but the first time I really recognised Mario was in *Super Mario Bros* for the [NES]. I was working at Epyx at the time and the testers were playing it. That year, I bought NES consoles for all of my nieces and nephews.

Mario Kart 64 is probably my favourite *Mario* game because it led us to make *Crash Team Racing*, which I consider to be the most fun game I've ever worked on. I loved the slide mechanics and the random power-ups to rubber-band the gameplay, helping out the players in the back. I love Wario Stadium, with the unintentional shortcut at the beginning of the track where you could jump over the wall twice to get a really low lap time.

Mario came to represent Nintendo as a mascot because of the success of *Super Mario Bros*. This led Nintendo to market based on Mario, which increased the character's popularity.

Popularity is a power function, so once you have brand recognition, you have inertia to give you a leg up on the competition. That's why everyone makes sequels, why movie companies try to make blockbuster movies, and why indies and original material have a hard time breaking through.

Just look at social gaming: *FarmVille*, which I [used to] work on, was twice as popular as the next most popular game; there are a bunch of games around second place, followed by the 'long tail' of games after that. There can only be one super popular game at a time, and at some point *FarmVille*'s popularity will fade and another game will rise to fill its spot. *World Of Warcraft* is another example of this.

With *Mario Sunshine* failing to capture or stir up the same level of popularity as previous big-budget *Mario* titles, and it becoming increasing likely that the GameCube would become Nintendo's most unsuccessful console at the time, outwardly it seemed that the once-infallible videogame giant was finally losing its grip on the market it formerly dominated, and Mario seemed to echo this sense of dispassion, appearing in a series of decent but uninspired sports sequels – *Mario Power Tennis*, *Mario Superstar Baseball* and *Mario Golf Toadstool Tour* – following a good but equally uninspired *Mario Kart* sequel with *Mario Kart: Double Dash!!*. But just as it seemed Nintendo was becoming crestfallen by its fall from greatness, the Wii happened and changed its fortunes in a way that nobody could have predicted.

» [Switch] *Super Mario Odyssey* lets you take control of the plumber's foes by using his brand-new 'Capture' ability.

SPACE ODYSSEY

Both *Mario Galaxy* and *Mario Galaxy 2* stand as nigh-on flawless examples of expert game design, and rank among the best games in the *Mario* series. By making inspired and sensible use of the Wii's motion-sensor controls, Nintendo was able to recapture the keen sense of fun, exploration and enjoyment that dazzled gamers in *Mario 64*. Making use of the sphere-walking technology first demoed in *Super Mario 128*, Miyamoto and his team shot for the stars by opting to set the games in outer space, with levels taking the form of galaxies, all filled with individual planets and worlds to explore. Like *Mario 64* before it, the controls were also wonderfully implemented. Players could steer Mario in comfortable fashion, but also aid him using the Wii Remote, which, through an on-screen reticule, could be used to suck up 'Star Bits' and launch Mario between planets. The *Galaxy* games also saw a return of the costume-style power-ups of old, including a bee costume that gave Mario the power of flight, a spring suit to heighten his jump, and the first 3D iteration of the Fire Flower.

Complementing these two interstellar adventures was another *Paper Mario* game, and a real return to the character's Famicom roots in the four-player platformer *New Super Mario Bros*, a game that brought simultaneous multiplayer back to the series for the first time since the original *Mario Bros*.

"THIS INDUSTRY WOULD BE A FAR GLUMMER PLACE WITHOUT MARIO"

Mario's adventures continued on Nintendo's next hardware releases with *New Super Mario Bros 2* and *Super Mario 3D Land* for Nintendo 3DS and the excellent *Super Mario 3D World* on Wii U. The Wii U got another surprise in the form of the brilliant *Super Mario Maker*, which allowed players to create their own levels and share them online. It was later released on 3DS. The eighth *Mario Kart* also made its debut on Wii U and introduced *F-Zero*-styled anti-gravity sections.

And then came the Switch in March 2017. Nintendo's most current games machine showcases a hybrid design that lets it straddle home console and handheld roles. The system launched with a brilliant *Zelda* title, *Breath Of The Wild*, but the heroic plumber didn't surface in a new adventure until October that year. It would turn out that *Super Mario Odyssey* was worth the wait. Enabling Mario to take control (or 'Capture', get it?) creatures by flinging his hat at them, the Nintendo icon's newest outing continues the series' runaway success, selling 9.07 million units by the end of 2017 alone.

Mario's long-term success is nothing short of a magnificent achievement. Always entertaining and almost always innovating, love him or not, you cannot deny that this industry would certainly be a far glummer place without him.

ULTIMATE GUIDE
CHUCKIE EGG

CHUCKIE EGG IS ONE OF 8-BIT COMPUTING'S MOST RENOWNED PLATFORM GAMES, ESPECIALLY ON THE ZX SPECTRUM AND BBC MICRO. JOIN US AS WE CELEBRATE THIS EGGSHELLENT GAME FROM THE SCRAMBLED MIND OF TEENAGE CODER NIGEL ALDERTON

WORDS BY GRAEME MASON

INSTRUCTIONS
OBJECTIVE- TO COLLECT EGGS FROM THE HEN-HOUSE.
KEYS
TYPE UP DOWN LEFT RIGHT JUMP
1 2 W 9 0 Z OR M
2 --CURSOR--KEYS-- 4 OR 8
3 I J A S O OR 1
KEY TYPES 1 & 2 ARE PRESET AND CANNOT BE CHANGED BUT THE TYPE 3 KEYS ARE USER DEFINEABLE.
) REDEFINE KEYS ♦ PRESS 1,2 OR

» [ZX Spectrum] *Chuckie Egg* includes the option to redefine its keys, a rare thing in 1983.

Throughout the Eighties, rivalries ran deep and often within the UK home computing scene. Of course, ZX Spectrum versus Commodore 64 was one of the biggest conflicts; yet even within each computer's sphere there were other, smaller skirmishes where fans of a particular game or genre would espouse its virtues over any competitor. In the early days of the ZX Spectrum in particular, there was one such battle, instigated by the release of two classic platform games: the slower pace and puzzle-solving of *Manic Miner* versus the quick-fire bird-dodging of Nigel Alderton's fantastic *Chuckie Egg*.

Chuckie Egg begins quaintly. The scene is a country farmyard, owned by a stout farmer named Hen House Harry. Within each segment of Harry's hen enclosure there are a selection of eggs (between nine and a round dozen) which our brave agriculturalist must gather in order to sell at his local market. Also dotted around each screen are little piles of corn, collection of which is not necessary to complete a level; instead, these temporarily pause the timer while also giving Harry a small score bonus.

» [ZX Spectrum] Stage two includes the first gap in the floor, but otherwise it's a simple affair.

But things have gotten a little weird inside Harry's hen enclosure. While the Mother Duck hovers impatiently within her cage, tall ducklings – resembling aggressive ostriches – patrol each screen, waiting to corner Harry and remove one of his lives. Furthermore, each stage is craftily crammed full of platforms, ladders, gaps and lifts. While Harry is in possession of a limited jump and can scoot across the floor swiftly, falling between the lowest gaps on the screen is lethal to the diminutive egg collector. Conversely, he can fall the entire length of the hen house without penalty – a useful escape method if the ducklings are closing in.

The ducklings each occupy a preordained path, guarding eggs while pecking at any corn they encounter. Over the course of eight increasingly devilish stages, these large birds must be avoided using the ladders and platforms as, unlike in *Chuckie Egg*'s great rival *Manic Miner*, the enemies cannot be jumped ▶

> "The C64 version was straightforward but I wanted to take advantage of the enhanced capabilities of the Atari"
> Sean Townsend

CE EGG

EGGSHELLENT PLAYING TIPS

EXCUSE THE PUNS AND FIND OUT HOW TO BECOME A HIGH-CLASS HEN HOUSE HARRY

KNOW THE SCORE

While there's no strict route to *Chuckie Egg*'s stages, there's always an optimum method according to the time-stopping corn and the pattern of the ducklings. By the time you're on the Mother Duck *and* ducklings a lot of this will go out of the window and it'll be more about simply staying alive.

HELL-EVATOR

Ah, the lifts. Inspired by the arcade game *Donkey Kong*, these rising slabs of yellow are the true test of *Chuckie Egg*. Fortunately for ZX Spectrum fans, Hen House Harry clips onto lifts should you slightly miss, yet it becomes more of a challenge once the Mother Duck finally leaves her cage in stage nine. Oh, and don't forget to get off the lift before it reaches the top.

THE MAIZE IN THE MAZE

If you're chasing a high score, those little piles of corn are invaluable in *Chuckie Egg*, each one accruing 50 points and a pausing the timer for a few brief moments. Determined to grab them all? Then you've gotta be quick, as the ducklings will greedily peck away at any corn that is in front of them.

KEEP AN EYE ON THE SELL BY DATE

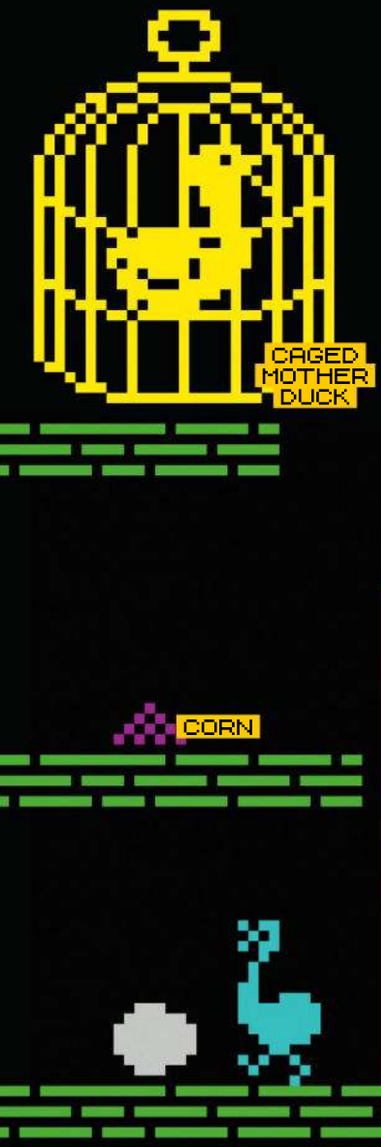
Those eggs aren't going to collect themselves, and while the time allotment initially appears generous, later levels can see that counter ticking down a little faster than Harry would like. Some stages such as the one pictured require a lot of backtracking; add in a chasing Mother Duck and Harry really has to keep his eye on the clock.

MIND THE GAP

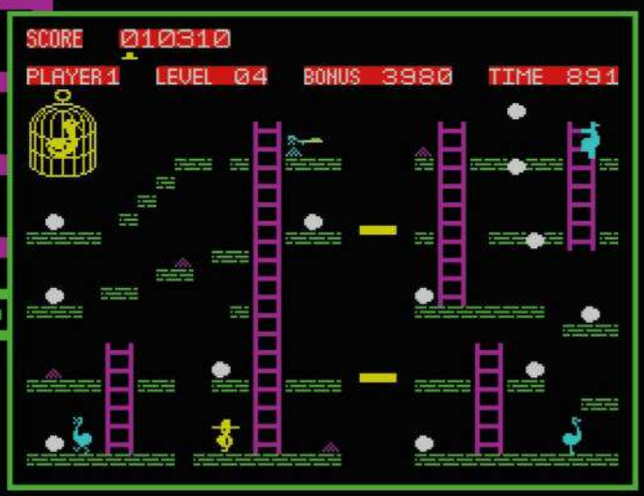
While Harry can fall extreme distances without a scratch, should he slip through one of the holes in the floor, he'll lose a life. From stage two onwards there are varying degrees of gaps to watch out for, especially under the lifts. Fortunately, the ducklings cannot jump so if there's one on the other side of a gap, there's some temporary respite.

CRAZY PHYSICS

While many of *Chuckie Egg*'s ports included realistic physics, there's no such thing in the Spectrum original as poor Harry literally bounces around the levels, crazily rebounding off the green platforms. Worse are the invisible walls to the left and right: mistime a jump and Harry will miss the platform, usually into a waiting gap below.



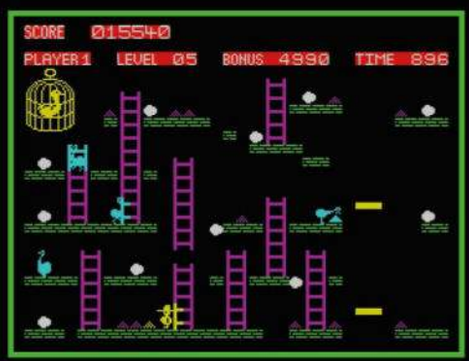
» [ZX Spectrum] The first big challenge: stage three and its fast-moving lifts. Who puts lifts in a hen house?



» [ZX Spectrum] By the fourth stage, Harry has to get uncomfortably close to the Mother Duck in order to retrieve an egg.

▶ over. Each location increases the risk for Harry: stage one contains just two ducklings and nothing else to harm the farmer. Stage two introduces a hazardous gap in the bottom floor while the third stage brings the first of those troublesome lifts, a pair of open and quickly rising yellow slabs that can be used to rapidly ascend to the top of the screen. A genuine health and safety nightmare, failure to correctly alight onto a lift results in Harry plummeting downwards and into the gap below – another life gone. By stage four, the platforms are more devious with small gaps, broken ladders and treacherously perched eggs combining to make the egg collecting quest highly perilous. But for Harry, there's far worse to come.

From the very first screen of *Chuckie Egg*, the Mother Duck sits waiting in its cage high in the top left of the display. Throughout the first eight screens the player wonders what's going to happen with this plump imprisoned mum, enraged at the pilfering of her eggs beneath her. Upon completing stage eight, Harry is sent back



» [ZX Spectrum] Some piles of corn are impossible to collect before a duckling snaps them up.

CONVERSION CAPERS

COMMODORE 64

While it doesn't look too much like the Spectrum original, there's a certain appeal to the C64 game. The main sprite is ridiculously large (albeit multicoloured), lacks Harry's ZX zip and has an irritating sound effect every time he jumps. Yet somehow it all hangs together and plays fluently enough.

ATARI 800

The Atari 800 game looks substantially different thanks to its impressive pseudo 3D effect platforms. We've also probably got the tallest Harry here although fortunately he can still navigate the stages with aplomb, although how that supremely irritating jump sound effect got through is anyone's guess.

BBC MICRO

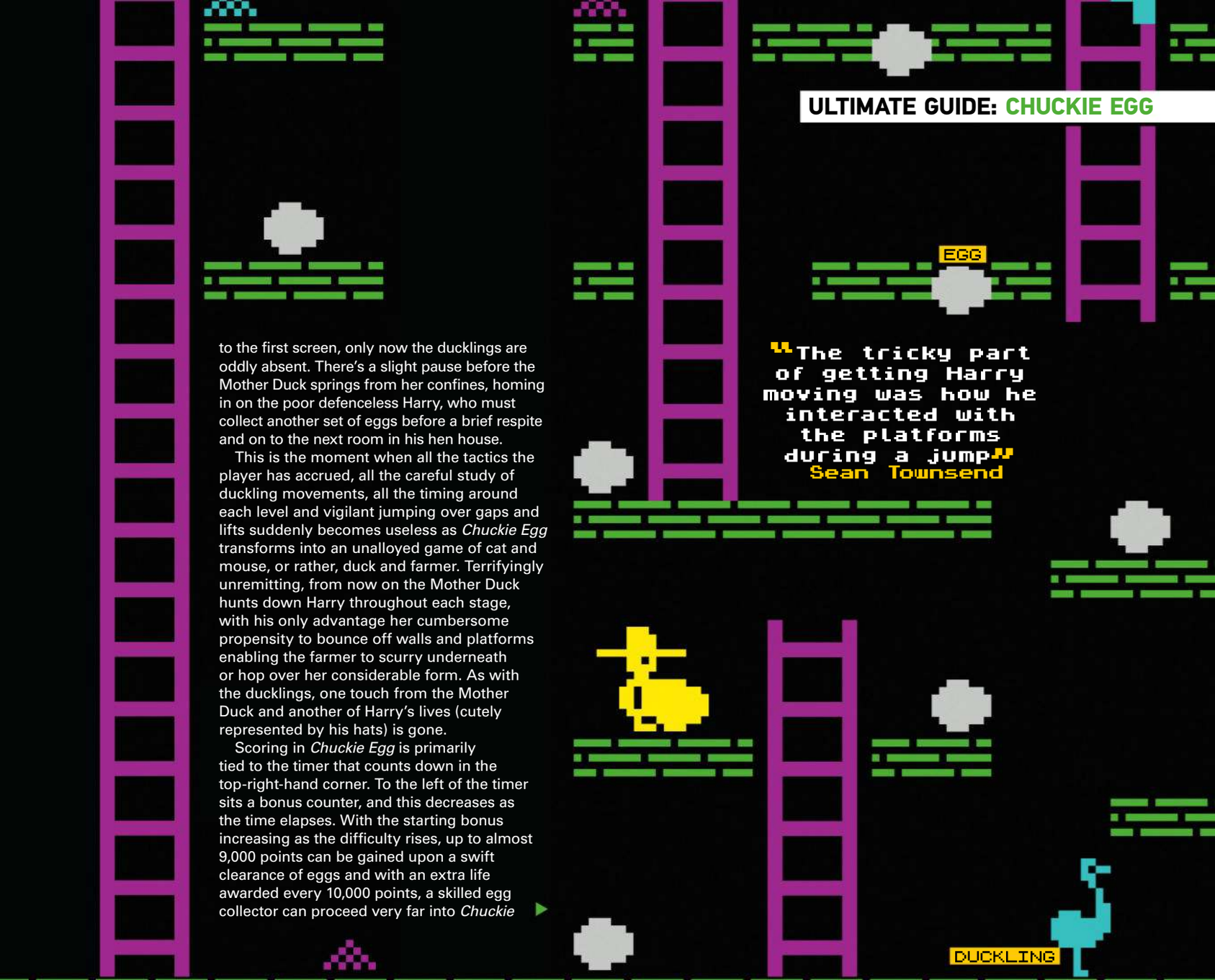
Coded by A'N'F boss Doug Anderson himself, this BBC Micro version of *Chuckie Egg* is the closest port in terms of display and considered superior in terms of gameplay by many thanks to its realistic physics. While it's an extremely close-run thing, we just prefer the charisma of the Spectrum version.

AMSTRAD CPC

The Amstrad CPC is another excellent stab at *Chuckie Egg* and shows no sign of cracking up against the Spectrum and BBC Micro versions. A slightly squatter screen display does the game no harm and Harry zips across the screen with the help of some sharp controls. This version also contains the nicest looking eggs.

DRAGON 32/64

It's hard not to admire A'N'F's desire to ensure its star game got to as many platforms as possible and this Dragon 32 game, written by Mike Webb, is another commendable effort. Harry's gained a few pounds, but again, despite cosmetic differences, this is another decent albeit overly green take on Nigel Alderton's classic.


EGG
"The tricky part of getting Harry moving was how he interacted with the platforms during a jump"
Sean Townsend
DUCKLING

to the first screen, only now the ducklings are oddly absent. There's a slight pause before the Mother Duck springs from her confines, homing in on the poor defenceless Harry, who must collect another set of eggs before a brief respite and on to the next room in his hen house.

This is the moment when all the tactics the player has accrued, all the careful study of duckling movements, all the timing around each level and vigilant jumping over gaps and lifts suddenly becomes useless as *Chuckie Egg* transforms into an unalloyed game of cat and mouse, or rather, duck and farmer. Terrifyingly unremitting, from now on the Mother Duck hunts down Harry throughout each stage, with his only advantage her cumbersome propensity to bounce off walls and platforms enabling the farmer to scurry underneath or hop over her considerable form. As with the ducklings, one touch from the Mother Duck and another of Harry's lives (cutely represented by his hats) is gone.

Scoring in *Chuckie Egg* is primarily tied to the timer that counts down in the top-right-hand corner. To the left of the timer sits a bonus counter, and this decreases as the time elapses. With the starting bonus increasing as the difficulty rises, up to almost 9,000 points can be gained upon a swift clearance of eggs and with an extra life awarded every 10,000 points, a skilled egg collector can proceed very far into *Chuckie*

HOW DO THE ANTICS OF HEN HOUSE HARRY FARE ON OTHER COMPUTERS?

ELECTRON

While similar visually to the BBC Micro, there's a little slice of flicker to contend with in this Electron port, which can be a little off-putting at times. Otherwise it's virtually identical to its bigger brother and is ultimately another excellent way to play *Chuckie Egg* for owners of the Acorn home computer.

MSX

Full of colour, especially Harry's natty green hat, this is possibly the fastest version of *Chuckie Egg*. It's fantastic fun to begin with but a couple of things mark it down. Firstly, the jump mechanic isn't as refined as it could be. Secondly, getting on lifts is unnecessarily pedantic, sucking much of the enjoyment out.

ATARI ST

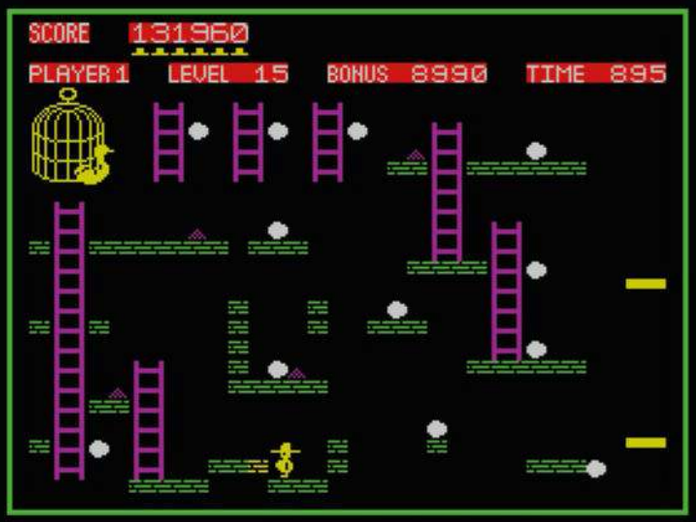
Somewhere between the original game's release late in 1983 and this Atari ST port five years later, Hen House Harry has morphed into an egg himself. In-game, Harry bizarrely explodes into a fried egg when caught by the ducklings but the backgrounds are improved as are the duckling sprites.

PC

Playing on the recommended EGA mode, this DOS version, coded by Ste Cork, runs at a fast pace and boasts a (free) range of colourful backdrops that won't help anybody predisposed to headaches. Harry himself looks good and moves swiftly, although the ducklings also have an increased turn of speed.

AMIGA

This is almost identical to its fellow 16-bit version of *Chuckie Egg* and includes the same issues with Harry The Egg's inflexible jump. There are plenty of attractive graphical flourishes, more pretty backdrops and jaunty tunes but it sadly lacks the inspired exuberance and enjoyment of the Spectrum original.



» [ZX Spectrum] The Mother Duck is out and after Harry!

» [ZX Spectrum] Fourth time around there are two more ducklings for Harry to contend with.

> "It was the start of my programming career – without Chuckie Egg I doubt I'd have spent the last 37 years developing software"
> Sean Townsend

» [ZX Spectrum] Working out how to slip past the Mother Duck is a key skill given she's ever present from stage nine onwards.

Egg's levels by saving up those extra lives. Furthermore, gathering up a pile of corn nets Harry 50 points while collecting an egg yields him 100 points.

Yet with *Chuckie Egg*'s difficulty rising sharply with both Mother Duck and double ducklings eventually chasing after Harry, each of those extra lives will come in very handy as the game proceeds.

The skills required in *Chuckie Egg* go far beyond mere pixel-perfect jumping. In fact, that trait is almost nonexistent with the player needing to call upon alternate abilities to navigate the hen house. Firstly, there are the lifts. Ever rising, it takes much practice and timing to perfect the correct jump onto the yellow slabs, although the game gives Harry a sporting chance by helping him up to safety should he be close enough. The farmer also bounces across the screen as if made of springy rubber. With open gaps proliferating as the game progresses, Harry must be very careful as he jumps, taking care not to rebound off a platform and into the inky depths below the hen house. These mechanics, welded to the agile abilities of Harry – there's no fussy positioning at the base of a ladder in *Chuckie Egg* – are what mark out the game from its pernickety peers and ensure that it is quite rightly regarded as a classic today, 38 years after its first release.

Chuckie Egg's legendary status has been cemented over the years by a series of reappearances, notably as a budget game and

» [ZX Spectrum] While it has its fans, *Chuckie Egg II* failed to match the original's charm.

on Beau Jolly's compilation, *10 Computer Hits*. A consistent seller, A'N'F published the game to a number of formats, with co-owner Doug Anderson achieving significant success with his BBC Micro port, the first to add realistic physics to Hen House Harry and the Mother Duck. Inevitably, A'N'F's thoughts turned to a sequel, and with the game's original creator Nigel Alderton departed for Ocean Software, the publisher designed a substantially larger game in-house, with simple puzzle-solving and exploration added, making *Chuckie Egg II* more akin to *Jet Set Willy* and the *Wally Week* games than its famous forebear. While offering more variety and another decent seller, the spirit of the original is firmly absent from *Chuckie Egg II* with its lengthy boring stretches and frustrating caverns a long way from the concise and fast-paced excitement of Nigel Alderton's timeless masterpiece.

Because unlike its sequel, even today the tight controls and beautifully uncomplicated gameplay of *Chuckie Egg* make it a delight to play, and play with panache, elegance and grace as Harry scurries around his hen house, collecting eggs and dodging ducks. To conclude, it is, in short, a cracking game.

DEVELOPER INTERVIEW

WE TALK TO THE MAN BEHIND BOTH THE COMMODORE 64 AND ATARI 800 CONVERSIONS OF CHUCKIE EGG, SEAN TOWNSEND

How did you get to work on C64 and Atari 800 *Chuckie Egg*?
I worked directly for A'N'F on not only *Chuckie Egg* but also *Chuckie Egg II* and *Gumshoe*. I hadn't heard of [*Chuckie Egg*]. My first computer was a VIC-20 followed by the C64 and Atari, so I'd never seen any games for the Spectrum. Obviously I had to play it prior to converting it and I enjoyed it. Nigel did a great job.

Speaking of Nigel, did you ever meet him?
No, never met him and never had any assistance. However, I did get some help from Mike Webb who was working at A'N'F at the time. Mike had done some of the other conversions so it was very familiar to him.

How did you go about writing the game?
It was done in stages. The first stage would have been getting the levels drawn on the screen. The Commodore 64 version was straightforward but I wanted to take advantage of the enhanced capabilities of the Atari. This can be seen with the 3D platforms and ladders and by the way Harry moves through the platforms while on the ladders.

What was the next stage?
Getting Harry to move around the level would be next. I used a dummy screen that used bits for each element and this is how I could easily tell if he was on a ladder or platform. The tricky part of getting Harry moving was how he interacted with the platforms during a jump but this was part of the *Chuckie Egg* DNA and had to be replicated almost exactly the same as the Spectrum version. The ducklings would be next, on the Atari version they were software sprites which I do remember taking a while to get working properly. Finally, the Mother Duck would be implemented and getting her moving around with momentum was very straightforward.

The main sprite is much larger – what happened there?
Hen House Harry is a multicolour sprite and to do this on the C64 you have to double the width and this is why he looks so wide compared to the single colour Spectrum and BBC versions.

Why did you use two colours then?
I don't think I would've got away with doing a single-coloured sprite on the C64 and Atari – both versions had better graphics capabilities and as such, a certain standard was expected.

Technically, how were the games developed?
Both versions were developed on an Atari 600XL using the superb MAC65 cartridge. Once assembled, the Commodore 64 version was sent down the serial port and a small BASIC program was typed to receive it. Also, the very talented Mike Webb wrote the fast loader for the cassette version.

You included Doug Anderson's improved inertia – how else do you think you did in retrospect?
Yes, it's in both versions and I believe it's something Nigel wished he'd implemented in the Spectrum version. Overall, I think I did a pretty good job, especially as it was my first published game. Some of the comments on YouTube rave about the Atari version and others slate it. It's the same with the C64. But it was the start of my programming career – without *Chuckie Egg* I doubt I'd have spent the last 37 years developing software.

Thanks to Sean for his time.

THE EVOLUTION OF PITFALL!

As well as inspiring its developer David Crane to make a sequel, the phenomenally successful Pitfall! also influenced his subsequent platform games. David explains how they evolved and distinguished themselves from his classic Atari 2600 adventure

WORDS BY RORY MILNE

[Atari 2600] *Pitfall!*'s use of alligators as stepping stones was inspired by the cartoon *Heckle And Jeckle*.

[Atari 2600] *Raiders Of The Lost Ark* influenced David Crane's decision to set *Pitfall!* in a jungle.

Prior to the release of *Pitfall!* in 1982, the vast majority – if not all platform games – had been linear and level-based. David Crane's platformer, by comparison, was set in a sprawling jungle environment, and as David explains, it really pushed the humble Atari 2600. "*Pitfall!* was built from the ground up using my newly-created human figure – once I *finally* achieved a recognisable character using just eight bits," David sighs. "Then while dreaming up the game, I placed the character running on a path and it was only natural to place that path in a jungle. I didn't set out to make a jungle adventure, but an adventure game which ended up in a jungle because it provided an appropriate setting. *Raiders Of The Lost Ark* had been in theatres, so the idea of setting *Pitfall!* in a jungle was partially inspired by that."

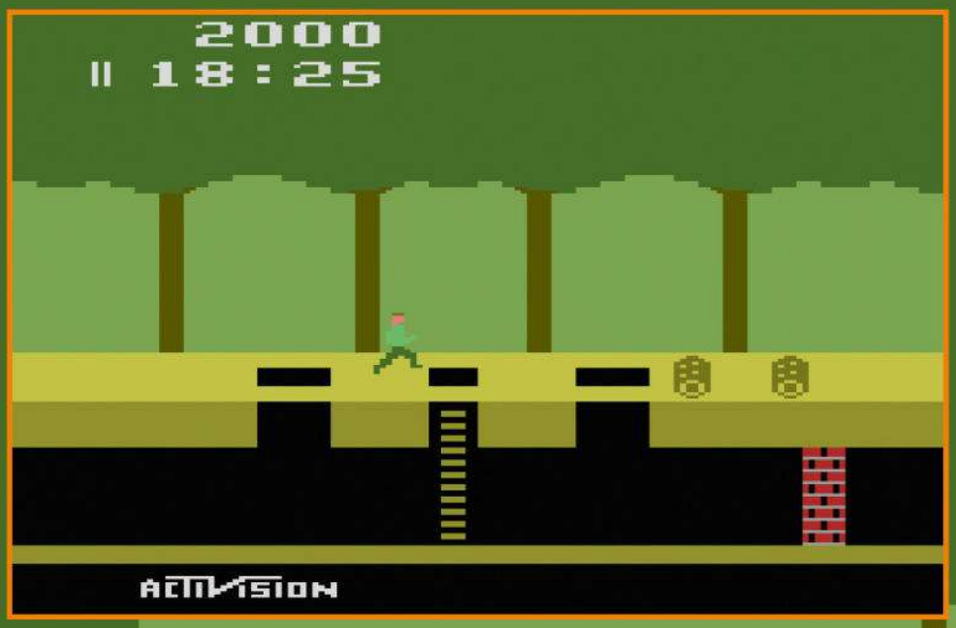
Although he's still making games, David Crane doesn't plan to make another *Pitfall!* title.

With a hero and setting in place, David next populated his platform game with pairs of hazards, carefully gauging their overall threat to test players without frustrating them. "It was important to tweak each interaction to be fun," David reasons. "You never had to deal with rolling logs while trying to jump the alligators, for example. But it was not unusual to have rolling logs on paths with holes, so you had to be careful where you stood for your jump. Each interaction was such that once a player reached a certain level of skill they would be able to beat them. So players were first introduced to the alligators with a swinging vine, and only later did they encounter them *without* a vine."

Having based *Pitfall!*'s core objectives around survival – and ultimately escape, David next flourish gave players a sidequest, which involved finding gold bars to boost their score. "In those days we played games for points," David reflects, "and collecting treasure was the only way to earn points. My recollection is that there were 32 treasures, but that was plenty, as it gave me the depth of gameplay I wanted."

Further efforts to broaden *Pitfall!*'s scope followed as David doubled the size of his adventure by locating scorpion-filled cave systems beneath its jungle trails. "To expand the gameplay, I added an underground path," David remembers, "and I turned that path into a shortcut – travelling underground traversed the jungle at triple speed, advancing a single underground screen at the speed of three above-ground screens. But any advantage came with a cost. The scorpions required a higher level of skill to jump, so the player had to master that skill to use the shortcut."

The layers of gameplay in David's platformer were duly noted on its release – *Pitfall!* was lauded by critics and sold in the millions. A year later, David designed an in-cartridge chip to support a bigger, better-looking sequel with four-channel music. "*Pitfall II* added multiple



levels of depth to the caverns rather than the single underground level in *Pitfall!*," David says of his follow-up's grander scale. "The game led Pitfall Harry deep into the caverns, despite the fact that his final goal lay just beyond his reach – one level below his feet. So by design, the player had to investigate and collect treasure in the lowest levels before heading back up, allowing for additional *depth* of gameplay – pun intended!"

> "Raiders Of The Lost Ark had been in theatres, so the idea of setting Pitfall! in a jungle was partially inspired by that"
> DAVID CRANE

In order to further differentiate *Pitfall II* from its predecessor, David gave its hero a way to float up through its caves, although it didn't quite fit the sequel's storyline. "Ironically, I was never directly asked, 'Where do helium-filled balloons come from in the deepest, darkest levels of an underground cavern?'" David says wryly. "The answer would have been, 'Because it's a videogame!'. Quite often when designing for the Atari 2600 we would add objects just because we could make them look good in eight bits of graphics. Well, the balloon looked really nice, and playing a circus-like song while riding the balloon let me show off the polyphonic musical hardware in my DPC chip."

Another of *Pitfall II*'s innovations came in the form of flooded caves, which David populated with electric eels and bookended with waterfalls. "I added the river because I could," David beams. "It was pretty, and it gave *Pitfall II* a greater distinction from the original. In addition, I put a waterfall – a one-way obstacle – into the river to force Harry to go deeper into the caverns. As for adding more challenges, water-based or otherwise, I was quite happy with the gameplay. A designer has to be able to judge when a game has enough content. Otherwise, a design can go on for years and never be enjoyed by the public."

[Atari 2600] You can speed through the caves in *Pitfall!*, but watch out for the deadly scorpions.

Once finished, the public certainly enjoyed *Pitfall II*, so much so that it topped the US sales charts. However, David decided against a third game, and five years passed before his next platformer, a NES title that he developed with Garry Kitchen. "*A Boy And His Blob* belonged to a different genre from *Pitfall!* and *Pitfall II*," David argues. "It was a 'tool-using adventure' that happened to be set in a platform game world. But I didn't like the idea of breaking the story flow to pause the game and pull up an inventory screen, select a tool or weapon, and return to the game. The inspiration to use a buddy character – who happened to be a shape-changing alien blob – solved that issue for me."

Unlike *Pitfall!*, the levels in David and Garry's platformer just had platforms and hazards, thanks to its shape-shifting alien Blobert, because if you needed a ladder, for example, you just turned him *into* a ladder by feeding him a specific jellybean. "Having the blob go through animating transformations was both very innovative and visually attractive," David enthuses. "Next came the creation of a world design that presented challenges that you could only overcome with Blobert's help, and bags of jellybeans scattered around to discover and use."

In an effort to give their platformer greater depth, David and Garry added shoot-'em-up

STAGES OF EVOLUTION: PHYSICAL CHALLENGES

FROM PITFALLS AND TRAMPOLINES TO LEAPING LAKES AND GRAPPLING HOOKS

PITFALL!

Given the influence of *Raiders Of The Lost Ark* on *Pitfall!*, it's unsurprising that the game incorporates a whole host of physical challenges. Its tests of timing and agility include swinging over rivers on vines, leaping over pits and using hungry alligators as stepping stones.

A BOY AND HIS BLOB

Not all of the forms that the blob in *A Boy And His Blob* takes provide you with ways to overcome physical obstacles, but the most commonly used ones do. Its trampoline form, for example, allows you to reach higher platforms, and when it's an umbrella, you can use it as a parachute.

ESCAPE FROM CAMP DEADLY

In addition to typical platforming challenges like avoiding enemies and collecting objects, *Camp Deadly* incorporates a series of superficially similar lakes. You need to guide Bart Simpson safely over these, with the twist being that you need a different strategy to cross each one.

POWER TOOL PURSUIT

Of the themed levels in *Power Tool Pursuit*, its *Pitfall!*-inspired jungle stages impress the most, but the game's challenges are largely the same throughout. There are chasms to jump, stacked platforms to ascend and ledges that you swing up to with your handheld grappling hook tool.

STAGES OF EVOLUTION:

TREASURE HUNTER

HOW GOLD BARS AND DRUG MONEY LED TO LOST COINS AND HIDDEN CRATES

PITFALL!

Your score in *Pitfall!* is like an energy bar. It isn't affected by falling in a river or colliding with foes – those cost lives, but inanimate hazards reduce your score. This adds meaning to finding *Pitfall!*'s gold bars, as that's the only way to achieve a respectable points tally.

A BOY AND HIS BLOB

Technically speaking, you have to find coins to buy vitamins in *A Boy And His Blob*, but that's still a treasure hunt for drug money – albeit a legal one. Once you've scored some pills, rather than popping them to get a power-up, you can use them as ammunition in a side-scrolling shoot-'em-up.

RESCUE OF PRINCESS BLOBETTE

Like its predecessor *A Boy And His Blob*, there's lots of treasure to collect in *Princess Blobette*. At first glance, this seems pointless, because there's nothing to spend it on, but finding all the loot unlocks a secret area full of swag, and that gives the game extra replay value.

POWER TOOL PURSUIT

Unlike David Crane's previous platformers, *Power Tool Pursuit* makes treasure hunting a core objective, where you level-up by finding hidden crates. These are full of power tools rather than gold bars or coins, which makes sense as the game's hero Tim Taylor loves power tools.

» [Atari 2600] Because its caves are far deeper than *Pitfall!*'s, *Pitfall II* provides balloons that you can float upwards with.

elements to its later stages, but otherwise, their game took inspiration from one of David's earlier triumphs. "We decided to design the game in two 'acts' that each took place in different environments," David explains. "The first was a two-dimensional underground cavern as a homage to *Pitfall II*, but for the second, we wanted something completely different, and Garry settled on a rapid-fire shooter. Either 'act' might have been enough for a NES game, but the two together would be dynamite."

With the majority of *A Boy And His Blob* channelling David's *Pitfall!* follow-up, underwater sections were an obvious addition to the NES project, although unlike those in *Pitfall II* they were free of electric eels and there was no swimming required. "The gameplay in the caverns required the use of tools – namely Blobert, so it only made sense for the boy to navigate the underwater sections of the game not by swimming but by figuring out how to use the blob," David explains. "Spoiler alert: you could breathe inside a giant cola bubble, and while riding underwater inside it, you had to combat buoyancy and currents, and get to treasures without popping the bubble on sharp rocks. Adding enemies might have been nice, but they were not necessary." Of course, there was also the NES platformer's second stage, which David and Garry set on a fictional planet where hazards had to be blasted with a 'VitaBlaster' that fired vitamins bought with treasure from the game's earlier cavern level. "After we created the fantasy backstory, it was a simple matter to have the boy take his collected treasure on Earth to the health food store, buy vitamins and rocket off to Blobolonia to save the vitamin-depleted planet," David recalls. "Although I should note that neither Garry nor I are recreational drug users, regardless of how the story of Blobolonia might sound!"

In fact, recreational drug use was the very last thing David and Garry wanted *A Boy And His Blob* to promote, especially given its target audience. "Early testing showed us that the game was likely to skew toward younger players – largely due to the cute backstory, I suppose," David contemplates, "so Garry and I tweaked the availability of jellybeans to keep younger players involved. If we had been designing for more hardcore players, we could

» [Atari 2600] Pitfall Harry's kidnapped sidekick appears in *Pitfall II*'s opening level, but he's just out of reach.

» [Atari 2600] *Pitfall II*'s sprawling caverns incorporate rivers, and are a major step up from the original's linear caves.

have tweaked the jellybean supply to make the game far more challenging."

As it turned out, the wholesome story of a boy with a blob who shot vitamins rather than bullets went down extremely well with players and parents alike. So much so, that David moved straight on to designing a Game Boy follow-up. "*Rescue Of Princess Blobette* was an entirely original game, as opposed to a Game Boy port of the original," David notes. "To me, that meant I should create some new and different blob transformations, with new and different associated interactions. The combination of the screen size and the memory configuration I was designing to also made it possible to animate some backgrounds. I believe the first idea I had was turning Blobert into a monkey wrench in order to 'throw a monkey wrench into the machinery'. That led to creating animated machines that gave the player other challenges to figure out."

> "Pitfall II added multiple levels of depth to the caverns rather than the single underground level in Pitfall!"
>
> DAVID CRANE

As well as its animated machines, David's handheld platformer further distinguished itself from its NES counterpart by making its treasure hunt a less essential part of its core gameplay. "Most games had a numerical score – and *Blobette* had that," David considers. "I learned from *Pitfall!* that people were interested in how many treasures they had collected – and *Blobette* showed that. *Blobette* required more puzzle-solving, including the collection of a number of coins that opened a treasure vault once all were collected, so I wouldn't describe the treasure collection as optional. It was mandatory for the player who wanted to 'beat' the game. That said, you could play *Blobette* in a number of different ways."

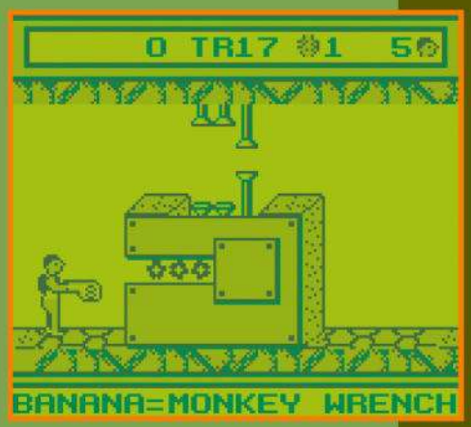
A second major differentiation from *A Boy And His Blob* followed as David added puzzles to his Game Boy follow-up that had solutions that didn't require the blob. "Rather than making the blob redundant, these additions made the jellybeans more relevant," David

» [NES] Like *Pitfall!*, *A Boy And His Blob* has ladders – although they're actually your shape-shifting blob.

» [NES] *A Boy And His Blob*'s deadly serpents bounce from left to right, exactly like *Pitfall II*'s poisonous toads.

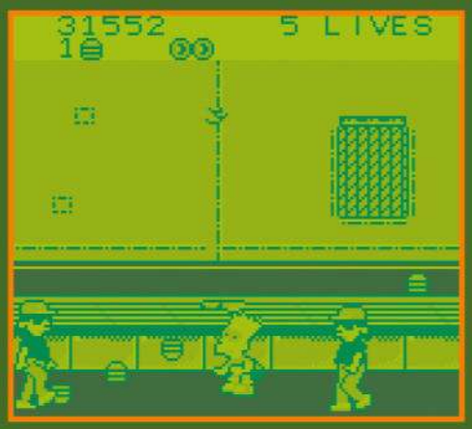
» [NES] The caverns in *A Boy And His Blob* were inspired by *Pitfall II* – they even have sections that are waterlogged.

» [Game Boy] Although the blob is essential in *Princess Blobette*, he isn't required for some puzzles.

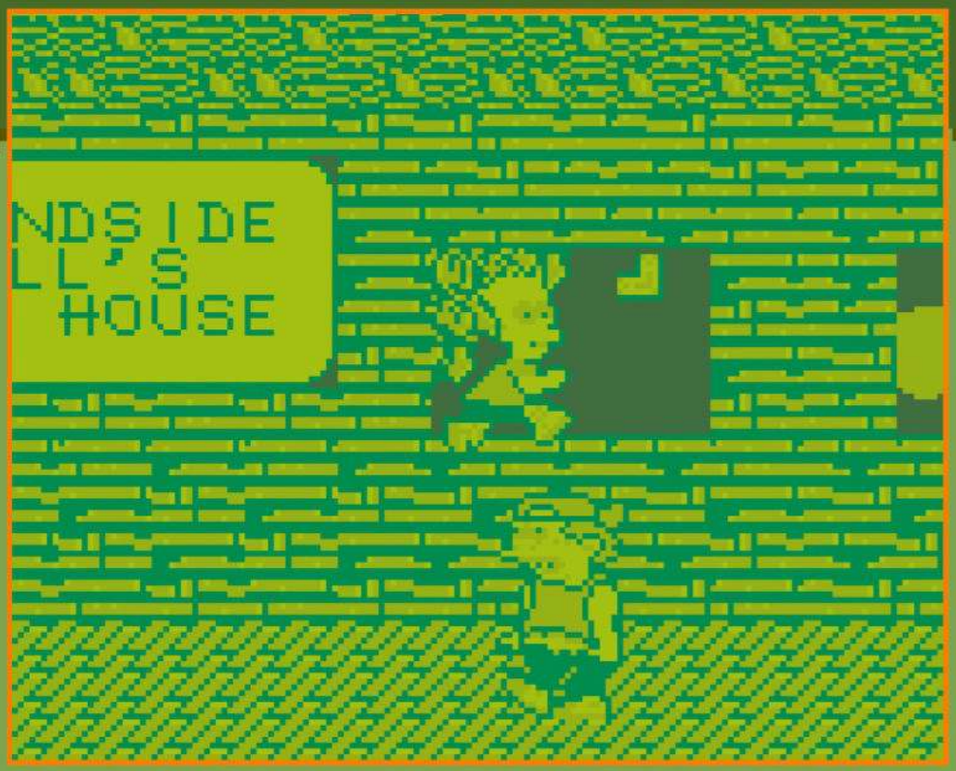


» [Game Boy] Unlike its predecessor *A Boy And His Blob*, *Princess Blobette* has various machine-based puzzles.

» [Game Boy] *Where A Boy And His Blob* has a vitamin-blasting gun, *Camp Deadly* has spitballs and boomerangs.



» [Game Boy] The food fight intermissions in *Camp Deadly* hark back to *Pitfall!*'s focus on jumping foes and hazards.



observes. "A player who had used the blob for many other tasks would initially be stumped trying to collect certain treasures. The only way to collect one diamond, for example, was to douse one of the torches – something the blob could not do. So what a wonderful discovery when you found out that the 'cool mint' jellybean put out the fire."

Although *Rescue Of Princess Blobette* was reviewed well when it came out, David didn't continue his *Blob* franchise. But the next year, he worked on another Game Boy platformer with a less heroic, less virtuous protagonist than his *Blob* or *Pitfall* titles. "Every game is built on different foundations," David points out. "Bart Simpson would never go unarmed into a jungle in the way that Pitfall Harry did, and he would more likely use the blob in far less acceptable ways than as simple ladders and bridges. Likewise, he would go to summer camp armed with adolescent weapons. The spitballs and boomerangs were appropriate options, and each had its own effect in the game."

As he had done with *A Boy And His Blob*, David opted to complement the platforming in his *Simpsons* platformer – *Escape From Camp Deadly* – with some pure shoot-'em-up interludes. "I wanted to give *Camp Deadly* more twitch gameplay than passive adventuring, and my favourite section was the food fight," David beams. "Having to turn around to throw food at your pursuers – losing ground to them to do so – was a delicious trade-off between speed and strategy. I tweaked the heck out of the timing until it became one of my favourite scenes in any of the games I published."

On its release, some reviewers loved *Camp Deadly*'s intense platforming while others found it rather unforgiving. Three years later, David co-designed a licensed SNES platformer called *Home Improvement: Power Tool Pursuit*, and unlike *Pitfall!*, finding its treasures was essential. "*Home Improvement: Power Tool Pursuit* was a game from the mid-Nineties, after tens of thousands of games had been created, including many games of that type," David muses, "so unlike the Seventies, where

> "Every game is built on different foundations. Bart Simpson would never go unarmed into a jungle"
>
> DAVID CRANE

[SNES] In many ways, *Power Tool Pursuit* is *Pitfall!* for the 16-bit era – especially its opening jungle stages.

[SNES] As with *Pitfall!*, *Power Tool Pursuit*'s jungle trails lead to underground caverns full of treasure.

the hardware barely allowed us to display a score, many different scoring metrics could be added, and so different players could have different goals when playing."

As with David's *Pitfall* titles, *Power Tool Pursuit* started in a jungle with a cave system. It featured hanging vines too, but its hero favoured swinging around on a rope and grappling hook. "Ten or 15 artists, animators, programmers and layout designers created the backgrounds, weapons, player physics and animations to show the player in action," David recollects, "and we put them all together over time. While developing the game, someone came up with a tool that provided a grappling hook effect, and it worked well in the context of the game – it was as simple as that."

Like he had with *A Boy And His Blob* and *Camp Deadly*, David armed *Power Tool Pursuit*'s protagonist, more specifically with power tools acquired by beating bosses. David puts these mechanics down to an organic process with corporate oversight. "The weapons that didn't make sense were discarded, the world layouts were tweaked and the boss monsters evolved," David reviews. "It all seemed to work well at the time, and that was a style of game that the studio could understand, and thus the style of game that they approved."

In keeping with *Camp Deadly*, *Power Tool Pursuit* split the critics, and David hasn't made another platform game since, but when the still-active developer is asked if he might follow-up his most famous platformer *Pitfall!* it's obvious that he's full of ideas. "I have no driving need to follow up *Pitfall II* with a sequel nor could I if I wanted to, since *Pitfall!* and Pitfall Harry are owned by today's Activision," David makes clear. "But a David Crane game on a modern console would probably be a side-view, 2.5D scrolling game with multiple depths to the background. There would be a number of different environments, and there would certainly be something fun to do. What is fun? Even after nearly 100 published games, that is still something that I can only say, 'I will know it when I see it.'"

STAGES OF EVOLUTION: EPIC EXPLORATION

JUNGLES, CAVERNS, ALIEN PLANETS AND A HELLISH SUMMER CAMP

PITFALL!

It's amazing to think that platformers before *Pitfall!* typically consisted of a few stages that played out in a fixed order. By comparison, *Pitfall!*'s massive jungle can be explored however you want and spans 255 different levels, each with a sub-level cave beneath a ground-level pathway.

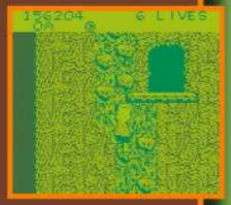
PITFALL II

The caves in *Pitfall!* are taken to a whole new level in its follow-up. Whereas the original game has a single, linear cave system, *Pitfall II* has vast cavernous regions that incorporate underground rivers, eclectic enemies and even helium balloons to take you up from the depths.

A BOY AND HIS BLOB

The inspiration that *A Boy And His Blob*'s vast cavern stages take from *Pitfall II* is plain to see, but its later levels are entirely original. After landing on an alien world and blasting bouncing hazards, you have to switch off various machines before confronting the game's boss.

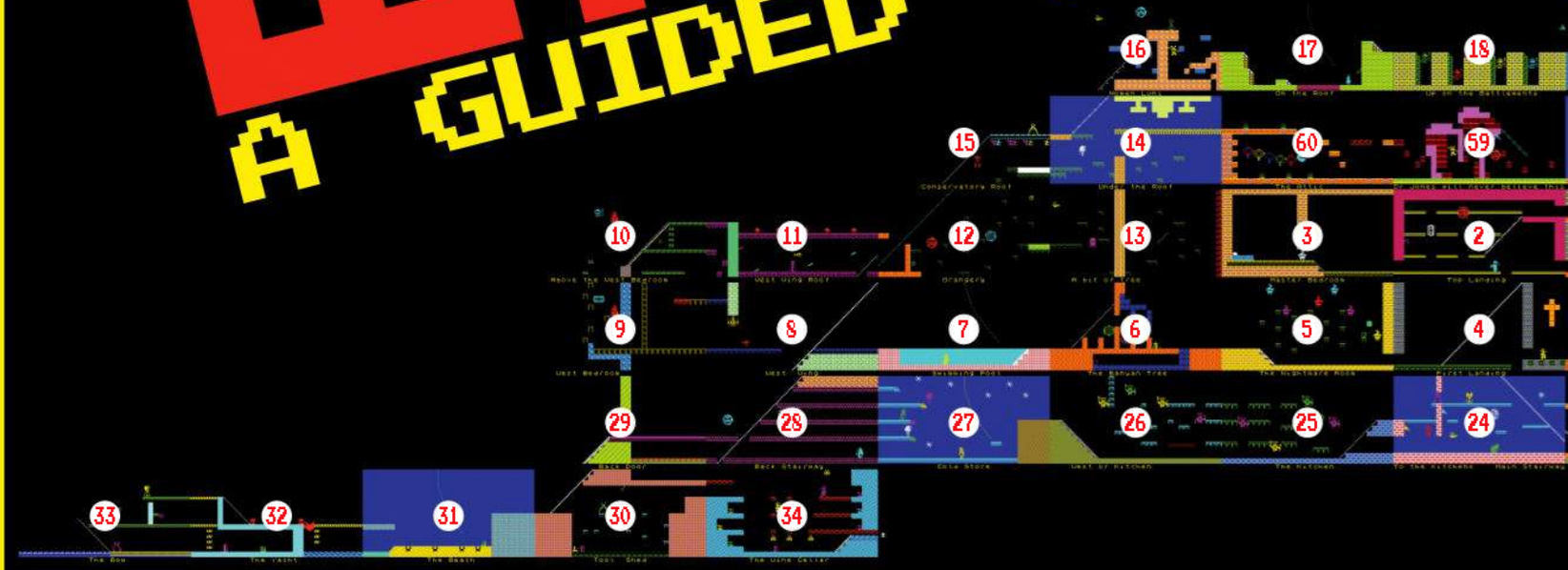
ESCAPE FROM CAMP DEADLY



The camp in *Camp Deadly* is nothing but comprehensive. As well as woodland walks patrolled by councillors that Bart Simpson has to fend off with spitballs, there are tree-hut boss levels with pits to leap over. Some later stages put Bart underground, and send him up a mountain.

JET SET WILLY

A GUIDED TOUR



We sat down with creator Matthew Smith with a couple of drinks and took a tour of all 60 rooms found in Jet Set Willy. Join us through the keyhole as Matthew shares his memories of Willy's madcap mansion

WORDS BY PAUL DRURY

If you had to choose one game character to represent the British 8-bit home computing scene, Miner Willy would be a sound choice, and his creator, Matthew Smith, similarly epitomised the heroic 'bedroom coder' of that pioneering period. He began programming arcade clones for his Tandy TRS-80 before using the machine to produce Spectrum titles, beginning with *Styx* in 1983 and then *Manic Miner* later the same year, which became a huge critical and commercial success. His legacy was secured the following year with the sprawling and surreal *Jet Set Willy,* but its creation took its toll on Matthew and he would not produce another full game again. Love for Miner Willy's games and fascination with their mercurial creator has endured, though, and there is still hope that both Willy and Matthew might yet make a triumphant return.

WILLY'S EXPANDING MANSION

CONVERSIONS THAT ADDED EXTRA ROOMS TO MATTHEW'S ORIGINAL DESIGN

AMSTRAD CPC

Subtitled '*Final Frontier*', this version added a staggering 74 new rooms, most of them found beneath the house and in space (accessed via The Rocket Room). This was later published for other machines as *JSW II*, featuring a total of 134 rooms.

THE DRAGON 32/64

This added 15 new rooms, including one called Matthew's Next Game, which was an empty room save for a bouncing ball, possibly a reference to the 'Footy' game Matt was rumoured to be working on (or a dig that whatever he was working on lacked content).

MEMOTECH MTX

Two rooms were added near to The MegaTree: The Courtyard and The Front Lawn. **Retro Gamer** issue 122's *Miner Willy's Retirement Home* feature shows the extra rooms from a myriad of conversions skilfully pieced together by master 8-bit architect Martyn Carroll.

> "I'd been forced into 'normal' hours by the people harassing me. I would still code at night and try to sleep in the day"
> Matthew Smith

THOROUGHLY MODDED WILLY

HOW JSW SPAWNED A COMMUNITY OF CREATORS

Soon after its release, editors became available which allowed players to create their own platform games using the *JSW* engine. This early example of a modding scene is still healthy and we urge you to visit jswcentral.org, created and curated by Daniel Gromann, which gathers together all known versions of *JSW* and its predecessor *Manic Miner*, from simple tweaks to the originals to whole new games containing hundreds of levels. "I am proud that the site provides a full, all-inclusive picture of this unique expression of human creativity," says Daniel. "Real magic lies in being able to create new parts of the *JSW* universe and trying to make them interesting for the players, both artistically and in terms of gameplay, can be truly intoxicating. It is gratifying to know that players can experience the joy of discovering new rooms and caverns just like they did back in the Eighties with Matthew's brilliant creations."

JET SET WILLY A GUIDED TOUR

THE BATHROOM

01 The enemy at the top is two Earths, rolling after each other, based on an episode of *Space 1999*. I think they crashed two moons into each other with no apparent ill effect. **RG: "Did you ever wake up in the bath after a heavy night?"** Nah, my Willy is an original work of art and is not based on any person living or dead. And I deny ever having slept in a bath.

TOP LANDING

02 That's a barrel with three Xs on it and it's red, so that's obviously Watneys. I had a Swiss Army knife so that went in. Having eight lives was my decision. I could see three lives wasn't enough, so I thought, 'What's a good number? What is there room on the screen for?' Eight seemed about right. It's a lucky number in Chinese. And in electronics.

MASTER BEDROOM

03 The housekeeper was based on a Greek lady who lived over the road. Yeah, her name was Maria. I don't think she ever knew she was in the game. **RG: "Her sprite looks a little odd… what's going on with her chest?"** I'm not commenting. She might still be living there. I do not wish to discuss [it].

FIRST LANDING

04 **RG: "When did you realise there was a bug here?"** About 40 years later. I think it was Cameron Else who fixed the bugs. He won the champagne and helicopter ride [for the first player to complete the game], though Alan [Maton, fellow director of Software Projects] told me he accepted cash instead. Whatever happened, Tommy [Barton, another director] will have written it off as a tax loss.

THE NIGHTMARE ROOM

05 There was probably a Pink Floyd influence, though I just thought Willy transforming into a pig was funny. I had the idea that the route you took was dependent on the skills you had, because there are some tricky jumps here. **RG: "Were you prone to nightmares?"** That's a leading question. I can't remember. I slept pretty well because I tended to be… erm… tired and emotional.

THE BANYAN TREE

06 I knew it was tricky while I was doing it, and deliberately kept it tricky, but I knew it was possible. I was the only one testing it… well, Alan might play it while I was on a piss break. Or sometimes I'd have to cease my whole operations while he satisfied himself. That's the only way I can describe it. He'd come round, sit behind me and… help me. **RG: "Define 'help'."** A backseat driver, mainly. And on balance, it was never helpful.

SWIMMING POOL

07 I think I had air at one point [during development] and was planning to make it run out more quickly here, so you'd have to keep jumping [out of the water] to get a breath… but I changed it to time, so no, you can't drown. And the monk can't, either.

WEST WING

08 **RG: "Is the name a reference to the USA?"** Nah, this is nothing to do with the West Wing of the White House. It was based on an English country house, though the only one I've visited was on a school trip to Speke House [near Liverpool airport]. I remember they had a nine-foot bed spread made of cat fur.

WEST BEDROOM

09 **RG: "What is a wobbling jelly doing in a bedroom?"** Oh there was no plan. I'd draw stuff first and then decide if I liked it afterwards. I'd draw the prototypes on graph paper, 16 by 16 [squares], but only animate them when they were on-screen and some things don't look good when you rotate them. So you keep drawing shit until it works!

ABOVE THE WEST BEDROOM

10 Ah, there's Dave Ward [future Ocean boss]. I included him to amuse and annoy. I'd done a *Pac-Man* clone [*Monster Muncher* for the VIC-20] for him back when he ran Spectrum Games Ltd. It was a nice little earner – £500 for three hours of work. **RG: "Did Dave know this sprite was meant to be him?"** Nah, and if he asks, it isn't him.

WEST WING ROOF

11 I think that they might be mushrooms on the top row. Or maybe tiny little trees. I had graph paper and tended to do six rooms together, two across and three down, on A3. I did have a master plan [with all the rooms] on paper but that got chucked out when the dog pissed on it. It's nearly a working square, but like the periodic table, there are a few 'excursions'.

ORANGERY

12 The red face isn't based on anyone, though I suppose I did see myself as a bit of an artist… well, more as an inventor. This was a computer program I was making, and the art was grist to the mill. And the mill is what I was selling. Or at least the flour. And nah, that's not a spider web – it's a spiral and a hex!

A BIT OF TREE

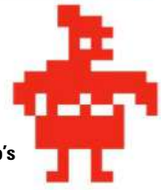
13 I like this, and I like the MegaTree even more with the pine leaves. I just thought a tree would look cool. That's why I had the Endor screen in *Manic Miner*. Am I an environmentalist? Only like the Green Party, in that I want to eliminate 90% of the population [Matt laughs maniacally while we scurry on to the next screen].

UNDER THE ROOF

14 That's the plane from *Zzoom* crashing through the roof. I did meet John Gibson [the author of *Zzoom*] and I did play games by Imagine [the Liverpool-based publisher]. Briefly. Because they were mainly shit. **RG: "Is the ice cream a nod to the seaside arcades of New Brighton?"** Nah, it's a nod to ice cream.

CONSERVATORY ROOF

15 That's a pair of pliers and those are probably little bears holding bottles. 'Why?' You have to ask, 'Why not?' I'd put stuff in and if no one could come up with a good reason why not, it stayed in. **RG: Who's that red enemy, then?** Your mum.



JET SET WILLY
A GUIDED TOUR

NOMEN LUNI

16 That's a blue meanie from The Beatles' *Yellow Submarine* and that's a bear, wearing overalls, like Rupert. **RG: "The title is a pun on Imagine Software's tagline. How did you feel when it went bust?"** It was inevitable and it had already gone south for me by then, too. I didn't have much faith in the future of our company. I was surrounded by people who wanted stuff 24 hours a day.

ON THE ROOF

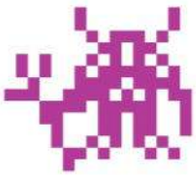
17 The title is a Carole King song. That's a rabbit. It hops one way and pirouettes the other. I suppose you want to know if I've ever had a dancing rabbit now, don't you? Yes, I had a rabbit. Well, I wouldn't say 'had'. We were just seeing each other [giggles].

UP ON THE BATTLEMENTS

18 Of course, the whole top of the roof is *Hunchback*. That game doesn't work without arrows – it's just a series of simple jumps – so I had to put them in and ended up using them on other screens, too. And that didn't always work.

WE MUST PERFORM A QUIRKAFLEEG

19 This was originally called 'The Gaping Pit' 'till I changed it [a reference to the *Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers* comics]. All the screen names are mine but I did ask people if they thought they were funny. The little kink in the rope was due to a miscalculation, but I liked it so I left it.



WATCH TOWER

20 This could be based on St John's Tower [on the banks of the Mersey] or it could be based on the Leaning Tower Of Pisa. That is definitely Weed, though, from *Bill And Ben*, with feet added. **RG: "Why does jumping off the top of this screen take you to The Off Licence?"** That could be a conspiracy. Or a cock-up. I think it was the latter.

I'M SURE I'VE SEEN THIS BEFORE...

21 This was me saying, 'Look, I can do a closer rip off of *Hunchback* than the official one which costs £5.95 and this is a mere tiny portion of a much bigger game! **RG: "Did you ever show the game to the Ocean Software people?"** Nah, I didn't get to go to shows by this time. I was pretty much locked up. I coded most of the game at home but then I was shuttled between here and work. When I was home, they hassled me here [at home], when I was at work, they hassled me there. There was no escape from it.

RESCUE ESMERELDA

22 Yeah, alright, Esmerelda isn't a looker but you've only got so many pixels. What you going to do? She's got a face. And pigtails.

ON TOP OF THE HOUSE

23 It's all very sparse, isn't it? I just didn't have time to fill in each screen intricately. That flag is a Red Ensign and it goes up and down, I suppose. You don't really see flagpoles like that in 'Surbiton-On-Sea' where the house is supposed to be, do ya? But never mind.

TO THE KITCHENS - MAIN STAIRWAY

24 I just think I put more effort into this screen. You've got chickens and eggs, a meat cleaver stuck in the wall and that could be a disco ball. If I'd got a goat sprite I would've had that running along down there, too. **RG "Is the title trying to orientate the player?"** That was the aim of all the screens – to give a hint of what was to come.

THE KITCHEN

25 The chef was probably based on Johnnie Cradock [husband of Fanny Cradock] and there might have been a bit of the Swedish chef [from *The Muppets*]. I took most of my cultural references off the telly, I suppose. This is basically Wacky Amoebatrons from *Manic Miner* spread over two screens.

WEST OF KITCHEN

26 I must have named the chef Andre because later I did a BASIC type-in game for *C&VG* [*Andre's Night Off,* which features 'the chef from the mansion']. I wrote it on the Spectrum, not the Tandy, and it's probably the biggest thing I ever wrote on an actual Spectrum. I got £50 a page, which is what they paid everyone.

COLD STORE

27 That ice cream and penguin could well be lifted straight out of *Manic Miner,* though I didn't carry much over, if anything. When Derrick [Rowson] did *JSW II* he told me he started from scratch because I wouldn't give him the source code. I found out that wasn't company property. I guarded it jealousy. Or that's what they kept telling me.

BACK STAIRWAY

28 This is obviously one of those screens I'd call 'filler'. And that's not a pear, it's an egg. **RG: "Were you still coding mainly at night, like with *Manic Miner*?"** I'd been forced into 'normal' hours by the people harassing me. I would still code at night and try to sleep in the day but then they'd come round and wake me up. Which meant I wasn't getting any sleep, basically. I kind of broke myself.

BACK DOOR

29 There's obviously space to put stuff in, but I didn't. Basically, I would say that's not finished. There are a lot of screens like that, looking at them now. I was just running out of energy.

TOOL SHED

30 I suppose a country house needs maintaining and so it needs a workshop. **RG: Was this influenced by Mellors from *Lady Chatterley's Lover*?"** Nah, it was more *Fawlty Towers.*

JET SET WILLY
A GUIDED TOUR

THE BEACH

31 The sewer backed up here last week and I had a nostalgic whiff of New Brighton beach in the old days. As they used to say, 'You don't go swimming in New Brighton, you just go through the motions.'

THE YACHT

32 Nah, I wasn't implying I could afford a yacht. I was just telling a story… about a lucky man who made the grade. When *Jet Set Willy* was finished and out, I did suspect I was going to be wealthy. False expectation, as it turned out. I thought I'd cracked it for a little while.

THE BOW

33 A journalist asked about the rumour that if you waited here until 11.45pm a raft would take you to an island, and I refused to confirm or deny it. Which they interpreted as a 50% chance it was true. I did think about having stuff happen at different times like the graphics changing when it got to night and the off licence closing. I mean, knowing when the off licence shut was one of the guiding principles of our lives back then.

THE WINE CELLAR

34 Ah, the secret exit! Once I knew you could walk through stairs, I wanted to do something with that. **RG: "Are the monk's long noses a comment on the disputed nature of religion?"** Er, possibly. And they were monks in a wine cellar so long noses would help.

THE FORGOTTEN ABBEY

35 If a screen looks and feels busy like this one it's because I've put the effort in. I'd flesh screens out as I went along and for some I'd mess about for ages. But I was being harassed to finish it, so by the end I'd do a block of six screens on paper and type them in as I'd drawn them.

THE SECURITY GUARD

36 **RG: "The player sees the lower path a long time before they can actually get to it."** Yeah, I liked to hint at what might be coming. Like, the secret passage in The Wine Cellar [which you need to go through to get to this screen]… everyone likes finding secrets like that, don't they?

ENTRANCE TO HADES

37 I had carefully designed screens so when you entered them, you would be safe but then falling into them… that was a different story. I knew you'd lose all your lives here. For a laugh… and I had that big sprite and I didn't know if I was going to keep it. **RG: "Is it Eddie, Iron Maiden's mascot?"** Erm, you'd have to check with my lawyer about that.

UNDER THE DRIVE

38 That might be a dancing Dalek, or maybe it's Sputnik, or the robot from… **RG: "*Lost in Space*? Do you have any favourite enemies in the game?"** I like about half of them. To be honest, I think the sprites are more finished than some of the screens.

TREE ROOT

39 **RG: "There seems to be a possible exit from this screen to an unused room in the code. Was that one of the four 'lost rooms'?** I seem to recall they were up on the roof somewhere but maybe there was one off here. **RG: "What was in the missing rooms?"** Dunno. I think there was a chimney stack in one of them and I was going to have another room on top of that.

THE DRIVE

40 Yeah, of course that's a giant egg. Why didn't I put a car on here instead? Nah, you don't drive on a drive… it's just there.

AT THE FOOT OF THE MEGATREE

41 The MegaTree game was originally going to be on the Spectrum but then [long pause]… I was asked to do it with a couple of C64 programmers and they had their own ideas of what they wanted to do. We never got very far, to be honest. Nah, I don't think we ever played *Jet Set Willy* together at Holt Rd. I can't say I ever played my own games once they were done.

INSIDE THE MEGATRUNK

42 Ah Little Weed is back! **RG: Was a little weed consumed during the making of *Jet Set Willy*?"** Nah, I think I was mainly drinking at the time. I think that's fair to say.

CUCKOO'S NEST

43 This is tricky. When you're doing a difficult screen, everything is relative. You have to think of every detail but only around a small area where you need to jump. Nah, the title of this screen isn't anything to do with *Robin's Nest*, though I did fancy Tessa Wyatt [Vicky in the TV show].

ON A BRANCH OVER THE DRIVE

44 I made some screens have different background colours for variety but you could get problems so I mainly stuck to black screens. Anything else would be sadistic.

TREE TOP

45 The idea of getting inside a trunk and climbing right to the top did give a sense of scale, having things bigger than one screen. […] I did experiment with scrolling on the Spectrum later with *Zombie Chickens* but the sprites were much bigger, like whole buses scrolling across the screen and you running to keep up with them. Scrolling whole characters is dead easy. It's the fine scrolling that's difficult.

JET SET WILLY
A GUIDED TOUR

OUT ON A LIMB

46 **RG: "Did you know a C16 game took this title and even included a Miner Willy sprite in it?"** Well, obviously I'm in no position to complain, what with me ripping off *Hunchback* and taking ideas from other games like *Miner 2049er* and *Donkey Kong*. It was almost a shared culture.

UNDER THE MEGATREE

47 Now you mention it, I'm not sure if that's a rabbit or a kangaroo at the bottom. What's the difference anyway? And that's not a beard on that face, it's a head with six legs. If you want to call it a Bug-Byte bug, that's up to you.

THE BRIDGE

48 **RG: "Was this level based on an actual bridge in Liverpool?"** Nah, sorry, there's nowhere you can stick a blue plaque. I think that's the only place that flying saucer appears.

THE OFF LICENCE

49 Twelve items – this is pay dirt! This is where you should be going after a party. I should have put a hairy dog in there, too. Is that what I did the morning after? Look, this is a fictional character. This is not autobiographical. Though I was enjoying my booze back then. **RG: "What was your drink of choice back then?"** A jeroboam of Remy Martin. Please.

THE FRONT DOOR

50 There's nothing in here! Well, there's one item. A shit room, you know, an empty room like this would just take an hour or so to get the first draft in there… though I do like that marble texture. Having to collect 83 items was nothing to do with me starting to write it in 1983. I mean, there was supposed to be 64 rooms but I couldn't work out why the last four weren't working, so there was supposed to be more items in total.

THE HALL

51 There's a top and bottom way here, but nah I'm not saying it's taken from *Pitfall!*. I'd seen [that game] but not played it. I never had an Atari.

BALLROOM EAST

52 There's no one dancing in the ballroom because the party is over. Yeah, I did all the music [for the game]. I had the sheet music for *Moonlight Sonata*. Someone had simplified it so I used that arrangement and simplified it even further for the Spectrum.

BALLROOM WEST

53 Actually, there is still some dancing – on the table. Yeah, that must be a rabbit. It's waggling its tail. That can't be a kangaroo. I must have reused a conveyor belt for the table.

THE CHAPEL

54 Why all the religious stuff? Well, it's just the English upper classes – they established religion, didn't they? You can't have a country house without a chapel. *Brideshead Revisited* had been on telly and that made an impression on me.

EAST WALL BASE

55 I think I had ideas of what else I could do here. That way out could lead somewhere. As it is, all you can do is jump to your death. But without the opportunity to die, how do you know you're alive? [Cackles sinisterly].

HALFWAY UP THE EAST WALL

56 **RG: "This is the only use of a conveyor 'ramp' in the game and all it does is push you to your death?"** That's the slippery slope! You always have more ideas than you end up using. For *Manic Miner*, I had the idea of water flowing through the screens. I must have already rejected that for *Jet Set Willy*.

PRIESTS' HOLE

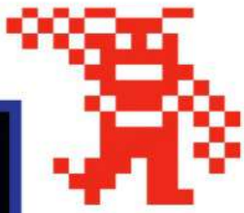
57 **RG: "Is this based on the Priest Hole at Speke Hall?"** How did you know I'd been to Speke Hall? Have you got access to my school records? **RG: You told us about it earlier, before we started drinking Absinthe."** Oh yeah… there's probably a link. One thing we were always taught about the aristocracy was that they murdered each other for being the wrong shade of Catholic. Which must be why we're not allowed to string them up on lamp posts now – they have suffered enough.

EMERGENCY GENERATOR

58 If there's a flying pig over a power station, it has to be Battersea. I was born in South Norwood [in London] so nah, I wasn't near Battersea but this is 'Surbiton-On-Sea' so that tells you it's somewhere down south.

DR JONES WILL NEVER BELIEVE THIS

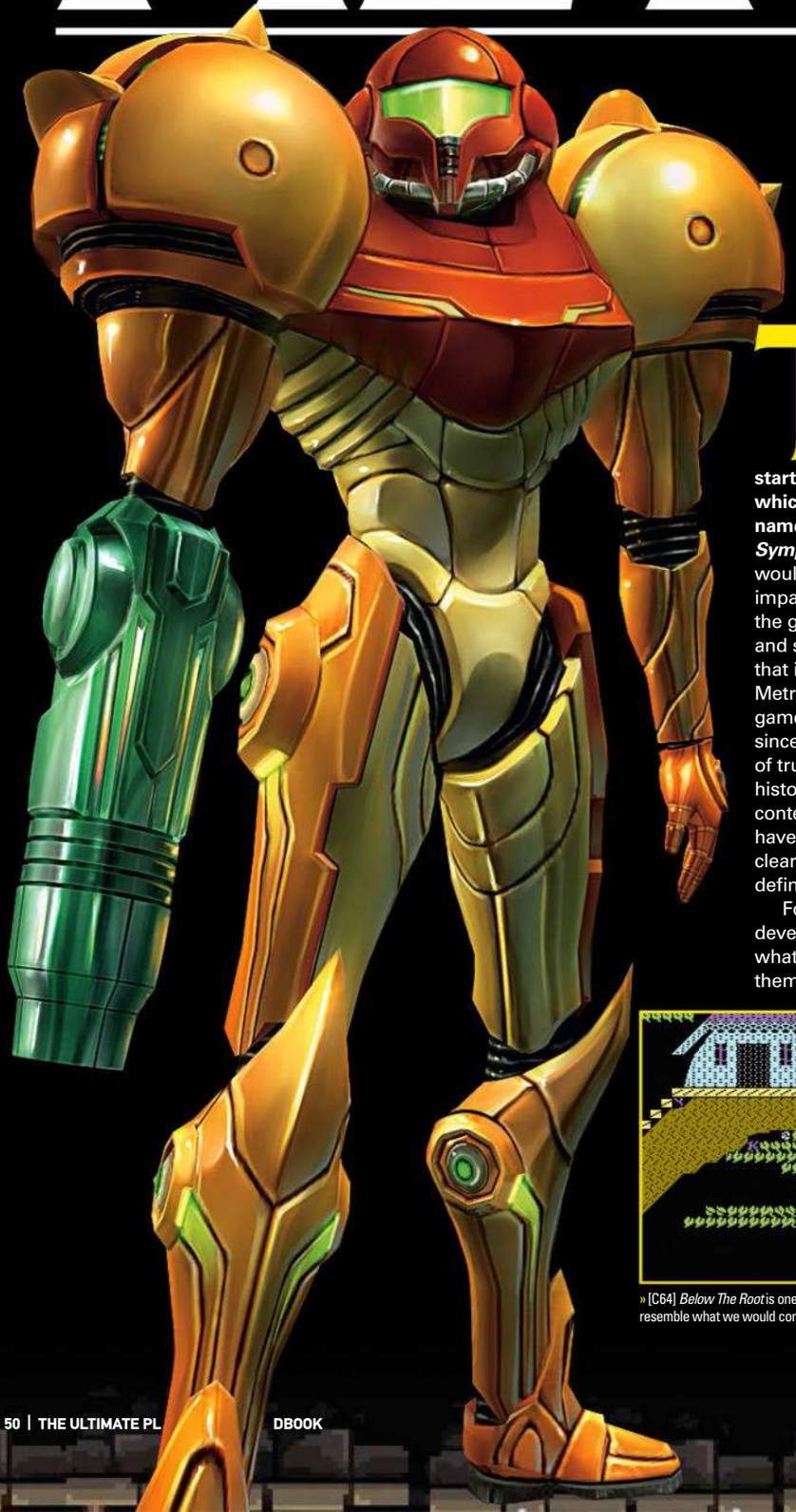
59 **RG: Is this a reference to the 'Myth Of Jones' as postulated by the philosopher Wilfrid Sellars?"** Nah, I'd not read that. Though it does sound very plausible. I'm sorry, I've not studied philosophy. They had me tagged for Oxbridge but I would've had to stay on and do me A-Levels. **RG: "So who was Dr Jones?"** A fictional character. I'd not seen the *Indiana Jones* films when I did this. I mean, after Smith, it's the most common name.



THE ATTIC

60 Nah, I wasn't aware of the 'attic bug' but I think this was next to one of the 'dead' rooms. I did the Pac-Man head and added in the centipede body afterwards. They looked rushed, don't they? The game was nearly finished and they were saying people were coming… [long pause, then cheerfully] well, it had to be out some time and nothing is ever perfect!

Bluffer's Guide to METROI



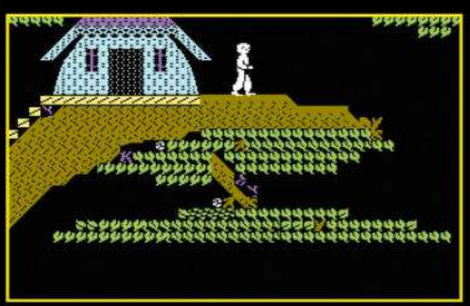
NOW WE'VE UNLOCKED THE SPECIAL 'HINDSIGHT' ABILITY, IT'S TIME TO BACKTRACK OUR WAY THROUGH THE HISTORY OF A GENRE THAT'S PRODUCED A BEVY OF CLASSICS AND HAS A FASCINATING STORY TO TELL

Words By Paul Walker-Emig

The obvious thing to do when taking a deep dive into the rich world of Metroidvanias would be to start with the two games from which the genre borrows its name – *Metroid* and *Castlevania: Symphony Of The Night*. While we wouldn't underplay the colossal impact these games have had on the genre, to take these two titles and say "here are the two games that invented the template for the Metroidvania and which every game in that genre has followed since", while containing a kernel of truth, would grossly simplify a history that is far more complex and contested than that narrative would have you believe. That becomes clear as soon as you start trying to define what a Metroidvania is.

For the most part, the developers we asked to tell us what 'Metroidvania' means to them gave us a similar answer. Graham Smith, co-founder and producer at Drinkbox Studios, the developer behind the *Guacamelee* games, cites "free-form open exploration, with parts of the world gated behind the unlocking of new powers/abilities/gear, requiring the player to re-explore through old areas". Simon Andersen, art director at D-Pad Studios, the team that made *Owlboy,* tells us that, "The key aspects have always been a focus on open exploration within a confined set of rooms – metaphorical or literal – where new areas are gated off by a new power that functions as a key," and also refers to an "emphasis on returning to older parts of the map". Last but not least, Thomas Happ, the creator of *Axiom Verge*, says that, "A Metroidvania is generally any game where, as you explore, you encounter gated-off areas which you later can unlock with items, abilities or events."

Clear and coherent as these definitions are, our interviewees nevertheless began gesturing to some of the complexities of determining exactly what is or is

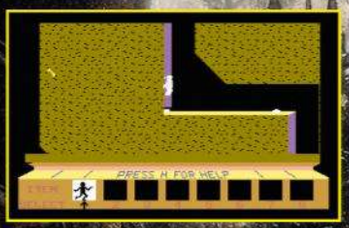


» [C64] *Below The Root* is one of the first games to resemble what we would consider a Metroidvania today.

» [C64] *Arac* is another early home computer release that shares similarities with *Metroid*.

Dvanias

» [NES] Full of new ideas and approaches, *Blaster Master* was a great Metroidvania before Metroidvania was even a word.



» [C64] Games like *A Journey To The Centre Of The Earth* have been unduly forgotten in the Metroidvania canon.

not a Metroidvania. Thomas says that there is a lot of variation in how the structure of a Metroidvania can be handled. "It could be that it's just optional content that's gated off or it could be that the whole game structure is nested behind a series of gates." It's a reasonable suggestion, but it's not difficult to imagine purists arguing that a game that does not *require* you to backtrack to access areas with new abilities doesn't *really* count as a Metroidvania. Simon suggests that while there are plenty of 3D games that could be considered Metroidvanias, "There's still a somewhat unspoken agreement that the games should in some way mirror the namesake visually, if only in perspective." And Jens Andersson, programmer on *Yoku's Island Express*, says that side-scrolling usually comes to mind when he thinks 'Metroidvania', though he has "decided that's a bit too limiting". Here, we find ourselves butting up against a debate about the extent to which 3D games can be considered Metroidvanias. We're not going to try and lay down the law here on what does and does not count as a Metroidvania; it's just worth acknowledging that the tightly defined nature of the genre's structure often results in games pushing up against those boundaries and complicating our conception of what a Metroidvania is.

With that in mind, we should exercise some caution when trying to pinpoint the moment when the genre was born. The easiest thing to do would be to pick out *Metroid* (1986), developed by Nintendo's R&D1 and Intelligent Systems, ▶

"A METROIDVANIA IS GENERALLY ANY GAME WHERE, AS YOU EXPLORE, YOU ENCOUNTER GATED OFF AREAS WHICH YOU CAN LATER UNLOCK WITH ITEMS, ABILITIES, OR EVENTS"
Thomas Happ

Jens Andersson

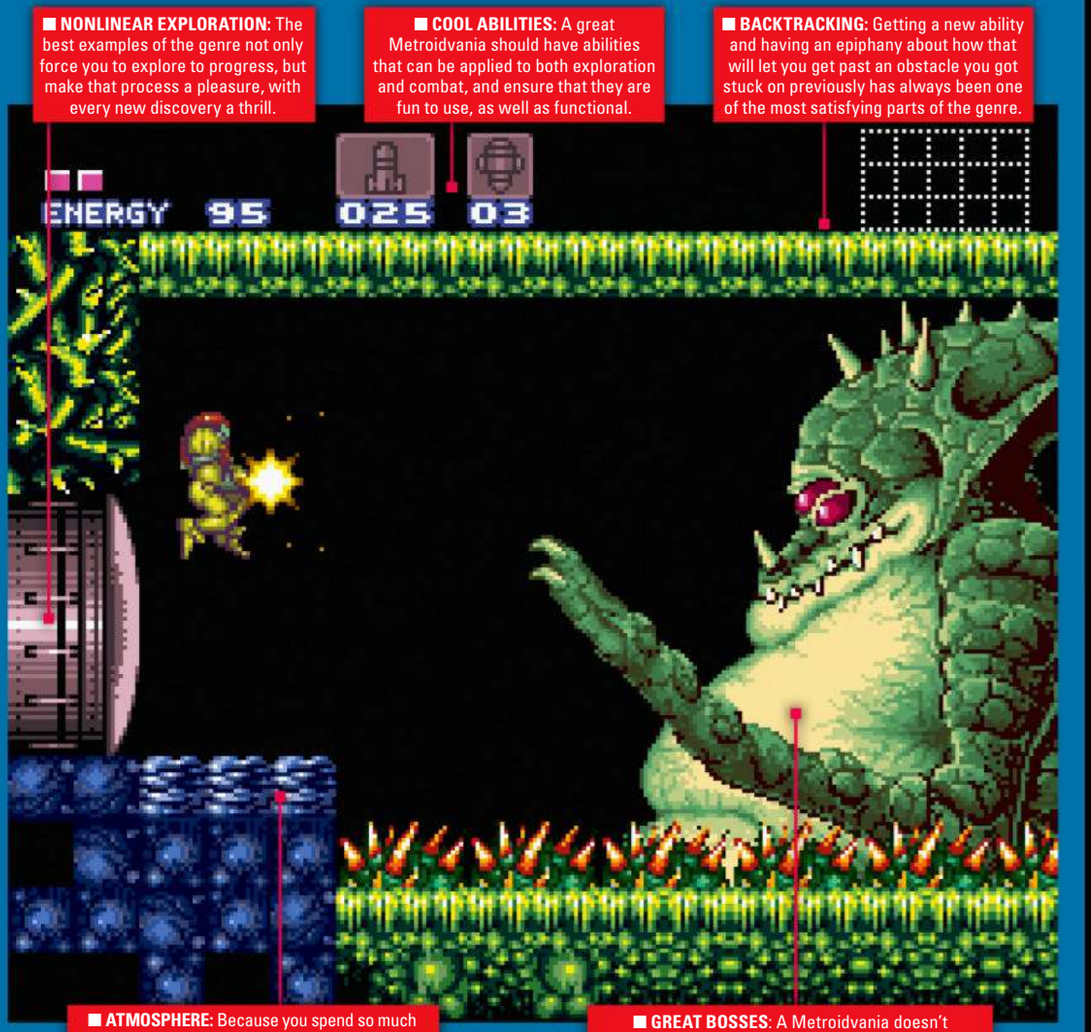
Graham Smith

Joakim Sandberg

Thomas Happ

What Makes A Great METROIDVANIA?

FULFILLING A CLASSIC FORMULA



■ **NONLINEAR EXPLORATION:** The best examples of the genre not only force you to explore to progress, but make that process a pleasure, with every new discovery a thrill.

■ **COOL ABILITIES:** A great Metroidvania should have abilities that can be applied to both exploration and combat, and ensure that they are fun to use, as well as functional.

■ **BACKTRACKING:** Getting a new ability and having an epiphany about how that will let you get past an obstacle you got stuck on previously has always been one of the most satisfying parts of the genre.

■ **ATMOSPHERE:** Because you spend so much time exploring and backtracking in Metroidvanias, crafting an atmosphere that makes the world compelling adds a lot to the experience.

■ **GREAT BOSSES:** A Metroidvania doesn't necessarily *need* bosses, but most of the best ones have them. It's a great way of forcing you to put new abilities to the test.

▶ and call it a day. But again, that would be a simplification. Though it is true that *Metroid* is one of the first games to combine the elements typically considered to constitute a Metroidvania, these ideas did not emerge in a vacuum. Nonlinear exploration, backtracking and the unlocking of new abilities required for progress are all things that games released prior to *Metroid* had experimented with and it's worth taking a moment to pay homage to these 'proto-Metroidvania' titles. *The Pharaoh's Curse*, originally released in 1983 for the Atari 8-bit systems, sees you exploring a series of rooms in an Egyptian tomb. The game requires you to find 16 treasures before returning to the surface and find keys to access locked gates and use a flying creature called the Winged Avenger to carry you to areas that are otherwise inaccessible. If it had been released at a time when the term existed, *A Journey To The Centre Of The Earth* (1984) for Commodore 64 may very well have been known as a Metroidvania. Again, you are tasked with finding a number of treasures in a system of underground caves and returning to the surface. Added to this exploration element is a series of ability-expanding items, like oxygen pills and dynamite, required

» [NES] Reaching the Morphing Ball, the first new ability in *Metroid*.

1984

■ *A Journey To The Centre Of The Earth* hits the Commodore 64 and *Below The Root* the PC, pioneering elements we would now think of as key to Metroidvanias.

1986

■ Nintendo's *Metroid* is released for the NES and introduces Samus Arun. The lesser known *Arac* and *Sacred Armour Of Antiriad* are released for home computers.

1988

■ Sunsoft's *Blaster Master* hits the NES, mixing top-down sections with side-scrolling to offer a slightly different approach to the genre. Several sequels would follow.

1989

■ *Wonderboy III: The Dragon's Trap* takes Metroidvania inspirations to send the Sega series in new directions. New areas are accessed with animal forms.

1994

■ The genre defining *Super Metroid* hits the SNES, influencing an entire generation of developers and enshrining the *Metroid* series' prominent place in gaming history.

1997

■ Konami's *Castlevania: Symphony Of The Night* bucks the 3D trend on PlayStation to deliver a legendary 2D title with an enduring reputation as an all-time classic.

2002

■ *Metroid Prime* takes the Metroidvania 3D, *Metroid: Fusion* hits the Game Boy Advance and the first entry in the *Shantae* series by Wayforward Technologies is released.

2004

■ Influential indie title *Cave Story* is released this year. Nintendo has a great year as well, releasing both *Metroid Prime 2* and *Metroid: Zero Mission* (an enhanced remake of *Metroid*).

» [Master System] *Wonder Boy III: The Dragon's Trap* lets you transform into different animals, which opened up new areas.

to access otherwise inaccessible areas. This year also gave us *Below The Root*, which came out on IBM PCs, Commodore 64 and Apple II. It's more an adventure game than a platformer, but it does feature a series of unlockable abilities, including a glider-like Shuba and Spirit-Skills that are vital to opening up new avenues for progress.

Even when we get to 1986, the year that *Metroid* was released, there are other titles that put to bed the idea that *Metroid* 'invented' the Metroidvania. *Arac* is a Commodore 64 game where you play as a robot who can capture enemies to gain new abilities that allow you to get closer to your final goal, and *The Sacred Armour Of Antiriad* sees you start with just a loincloth and rocks, and end up flying around and shooting lasers using upgrades for the powerful Antiriad armour. Graham points to the example of another game that was released in Japanese arcades in 1986, before hitting the NES and C64 a year later, "Although it's one of the lesser-known Metroidvania style games, I had a blast playing through *Rygar* on the NES with a close friend. The game alternates between side-scrolling platforming levels and top-down exploratory levels, which was the first time I had ever seen a game do that."

Having established that *Metroid* did not 'invent' the Metroidvania, we can now unreservedly give it the credit it is due. *Metroid* played a massive role when it came to formalising the structure of the genre, hence why, of the early crop of Metroidvanias, it is probably the most recognisable when it comes to what we would expect to see from the genre today. Introducing us to the now-legendary character of Samus Aran, *Metroid* drops you onto the hostile Planet Zebes with a gun and very little direction, forcing you to explore and discover new abilities like the Morph Ball and Screw Attack to enhance your effectiveness in combat and be able to explore locations that would otherwise be locked off.

"I was about eight when I played *Metroid*," Thomas recalls, "and it was revolutionary to my young mind because it was one of the first games I'd played where you could explore a large world filled with secrets."

That thrill of exploration that typifies the genre was something carried over into the game's sequel, *Super Metroid*, released on the SNES in 1994. Refining everything about the first entry, it is still regarded as one of the best games ever released and played a huge role in popularising the genre.

"*Metroid* and probably more notably, *Super Metroid*, were unusual in their emphasis on getting lost," says Simon while reflecting on their appeal. "In a time when arcade action games were still the norm, you would generally have a pretty stark divide in genres. Games that focused on atmosphere and varied choices were generally something aimed at the home computer market, and while consoles were no strangers to things like RPGs and the like, there weren't many games that allowed you to get lost on purpose. Moreover, the *Metroid* series was a lot more physical than an RPG that relied on metaphorical representations for the world you were interacting with," Simon continues. "You fought monsters in a similar fashion to a run-and-gunner, but if you wanted to find out what was at the top of a cliff you physically had to climb it somehow. It's a subtle difference as more slower-paced games would often show you a problem in a more abstract form to explain to you why an issue was not solvable. *Metroid* left you with a physical problem with no answers, and you could easily wander aimlessly

» [SNES] *Super Metroid* was masterful when it came to creating a sense of atmosphere through sound and visuals.

"METROID AND PROBABLY MORE NOTABLY, SUPER METROID, WERE UNUSUAL IN THEIR EMPHASIS ON GETTING LOST"
Simon Andersen

» [Game Boy Color] The *Shantae* series doesn't get a lot of attention, but has delivered lots of fantastic Metroidvanias.

2009

■ Rocksteady Studios' *Batman: Arkham Asylum* helps make Metroidvania mainstream and Chair's *Shadow Complex* sells like proverbial hotcakes on the Xbox 360.

2013

■ The excellent *Guacamelee!* and *Steamworld Dig* emerge as part of a snowballing trend of great Metroidvanias from indies. Both titles would receive sequels in later years.

2015

■ The fantastic retro-inspired *Axiom Verge* by Thomas Happ and Moon Studios' exceptionally beautiful *Ori And The Blind Forest* both win critical acclaim from the games industry.

2016

■ *Owlboy*, which began development in 2006, is finally released and proves to be a real hoot. *Shantae: Half-Genie Hero* and Xbox One exclusive *ReCore* are also released.

2017

■ Team Cherry's Kickstarter, *Hollow Knight* wins widespread acclaim and Arkane Studios' *Prey* shows how Metroidvania elements can be blended with other genres.

2018

■ In a bumper year for the genre, we get *Steamworld Dig 2*, *Guacamelee! 2*, Motion Twins' *Dead Cells*, *Iconoclasts*, *Yoku's Island Express* and Sabotage Studios' *The Messenger.*

2019

■ *Bloodstained: Ritual Of The Night*, *Shantae And The Seven Sirens*, *Gato Roboto*, *Headlander*, *Blasphemous* and *Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order* are all released this year.

2020

■ *Blind Forest* sequel, *Ori And The Will Of The Wisps* comes out, along with 'reverse horror game' *Carrion*, which has you playing as a very dangerous tentacled monster.

until you found a tool to help you through that area. Yet the fact that it was a physical problem meant nothing was vague. It makes sense that running faster gets you through a room with quickly closing doors."

Though we still hadn't gotten to the release of the game used in the second half of the Metroidvania portmanteau and the coining of the term, titles we could now reasonably apply the Metroidvania label to retrospectively continued to be released. The 1988 NES title *Blaster Master* mixes 2D platforming and top-down sections where you switch between controlling protagonist Jason and piloting a tank, with new abilities that could be applied in earlier levels unlocked by defeating bosses. In 1989, Master System title *Wonder Boy III: The Dragon's Trap* took the series in a new direction by introducing the kind of nonlinear, item-dependent structure typical of Metroidvanias. The twist here was rather than accessing a new area through a specific item, you could instead morph into a new animal form. In 1994, the year *Super Metroid* was released, *Super Adventure Island 2* offered the option to visit different islands and find items and equipment vital to progress on other islands.

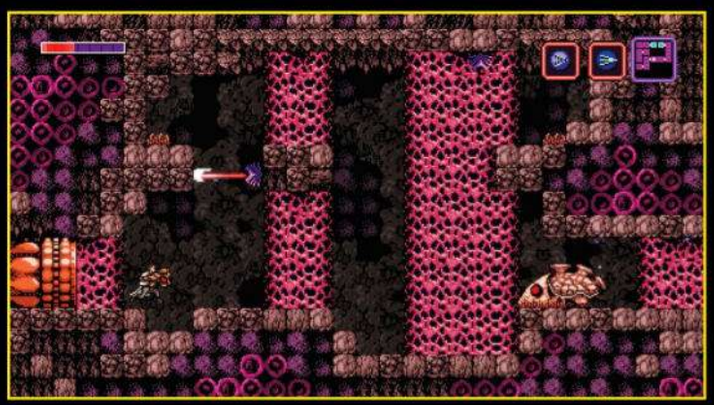
That takes us to 1997 and the release of *Castlevania: Symphony Of The Night* for the PlayStation. Though the *Castlevania* series began with straight-up platforming, it experimented in subsequent releases with nonlinear exploration, culminating in the masterpiece that is *Symphony Of The Night*. The game sees you crisscrossing Dracula's castle, gaining new abilities as you go, as well as new forms, assistant director Koji Igarashi has cited the *Zelda* series as a key influence on that structure.

» [PC] That *Guacamelee* finds a way to make unlockable abilities, like the uppercut, fun to use in combat and platforming is part of what makes it a success.

"*Symphony Of The Night* inspired a lot of the future of action games incorporating RPG stats and damage numbers, popularising a new degree of character expression and growth most action games prior didn't really go for," suggests Joakim Sandberg, the developer of *Iconoclasts* (2018). "Along with *Metroid*, it made you really get familiar with one continuous world. They stuck in your mind, became characters of their own, in a way. Returning to an area you already mastered has a form of compressed nostalgia and sense of familiarity and safety. That influenced so many games to come, not just within this genre."

Indeed, zeroing in on the richness of those worlds should remind us that *Super Metroid* and *Castlevania* aren't just towering giants of the genre because of how well they embody the Metroidvania template, it's because they are superb games in and of themselves. "Both of them excelled with presenting a world for you to explore and master, rather than a string of levels. The idea that the player got to decide where to go next really spoke to me and has influenced everything I've worked on," says Jens. "I think what stuck with me the most [from *Symphony Of The Night*] was the artistic detail of the castle and Michiru Yamane's orchestral soundtrack. They combined in a way that made you really want to explore more of that world," says Thomas, reminding us that rich aesthetics and the creation of a desire to make you *want* to explore are an important part of why *SOTN* and *Super Metroid* had their names combined to give the genre its name. "They're popular for good reason," to use Joakim's words.

In the wake of *Symphony Of The Night*, something interesting happens. Given the critical praise lavished on *Super Metroid* and *Castlevania* and their prominent positions today in 'greatest game



» [PC] Though it has clear retro inspirations, *Axiom Verge* shines thanks to its innovative and original take on the abilities it brings to the Metroidvania formula.

"SYMPHONY OF THE NIGHT INSPIRED A LOT OF THE FUTURE OF ACTION GAMES INCORPORATING RPG STATS AND DAMAGE NUMBERS, POPULARISING A NEW DEGREE OF CHARACTER EXPRESSION AND GROWTH MOST ACTION GAMES PRIOR DIDN'T REALLY GO FOR"
Joakim Sandberg

» [PlayStation] Opening on a boss fight with Dracula was a pretty epic way to kick off *Symphony Of The Night*.

» [PC] *Cave Story* is credited as the game that showed that indies could compete with bigger studios and highlighted that 2D platformers were a viable genre.

» [PC] The sprawling and atmospheric *Hollow Knight* stands out as one of the most critically acclaimed Metroidvanias of recent years.

» [PC] It's quite common for Metroidvanias to be sparse in terms of story, but the likes of *Iconoclasts* prove there's no reason they can't tell a tale.

ever' discussions, you might expect that they would have unleashed a wave of copycat Metroidvanias. That didn't happen. "The genre seemed to fall into the background for a while," Graham reflects.

C*astlevania* moved away from the Metroidvania formula for its two N64 releases in 1999 – *Castlevania* and *Castlevania: Legacy Of Darkness*. Konami would only periodically return to the genre with handheld *Castlevania* releases, such as *Castlevania: Aria Of Sorrow* for the Game Boy Advance in 2003 and *Castlevania: Dawn Of Sorrow* in 2005. We did at least get the debut of another now long-running series with the release of the first *Shantae* game for the Game Boy Colour in 2002, but the half-genie hero of that fun and colourful series was then absent until 2010 with *Shantae: Risky's Revenge*. *Metroid* kept flying the flag to some degree with *Metroid Fusion* for the Game Boy Advance and *Metroid Prime* for the GameCube, both released in 2002, the latter proving it was possible to translate the Metroidvania into 3D. "Being dropped into that unknown and beautiful world was amazing, and their use of environmental storytelling is something I think has inspired a lot of designers," says Jens on *Metroid Prime*. "Their introductory level was superb, where you got to feel the power of Samus' suit, and then spread all those abilities across the game."

Nonetheless, *Metroid Prime* was an outlier, not the harbinger of a trend. "I believe it may have had something to do with the push more towards 3D games at that time," suggests Graham on the relative dearth of Metroidvania games at that time.

"Triple-A studios need a big licence to make Metroidvanias feasible," Thomas argues, citing *Batman: Arkham* and *Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order*, "so it happens a lot less often". Graham points out, "Modern 3D games come with additional player expectations, like epic environments, motion capture animations, voice actors, etc. Designing good 3D combat mechanics like those found in *Arkham Asylum* can also be very challenging. I think the costs and financial risks are much higher when considering 3D, which may be one reason that people avoid doing 3D games in the genre."

There was, however, a revival in the Metroidvania genre. It was

Essential METROIDVANIAS

BACKTRACKING THROUGH THE CLASSICS

Super Metroid

This SNES classic is still regarded as one of the greatest games ever made, *Super Metroid* simply had to be on this list. It is as well-regarded for its expertly crafted foreboding sci-fi atmosphere, aesthetics and incredible music as well as the fantastic level design and mechanics. Fortunately, Nintendo has frequently released it on modern consoles, most recently via the Switch's online subscription service, meaning it has remained easy to play.

Castlevania: Symphony Of The Night

One of the game's responsible for the very term 'Metroidvania' is another no-brainer when it comes to Metroidvania essentials. Though it didn't perform particularly well at release on PlayStation, its quality led to gradual word-of-mouth success and its well-deserved reputation has only been enhanced over the years. Its rich systems and the memorable aesthetics of Dracula's castle are still a treat today.

Cave Story

The game often credited as the first modern 'indie' game is both interesting because of that important historical role and a brilliant game in and of itself. Playing it today, you can easily see how this retro love letter, directly inspired by the likes of *Metroid*, showed how the 2D Metroidvania remained relevant. An enhanced version *Cave Story+*, was released for PC in 2011 and the Switch in 2017 and there's 2012 version for the 3DS, *Cave Story 3D*.

Hollow Knight

"*Hollow Knight* is now easily my favourite game in the genre," says Graham Smith of Drinkbox Studios. "The world that they crafted feels truly epic, with so many memorable characters and areas, surprises around every turn, and an incredible number of unique combat challenges. They managed to create a vast fantasy world rich with interesting history that's unlike anything I've seen in the genre."

Metroid Prime

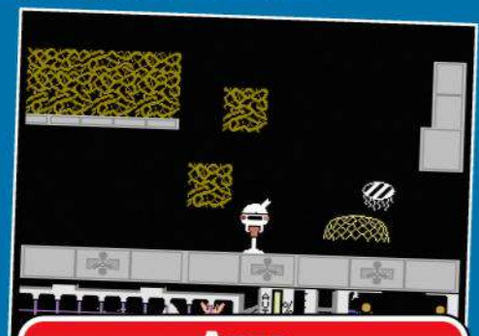
While it's true that the genre is strongly associated with 2D, there are some incredible 3D titles out there, so we wanted to be sure to include one of those. Retro Studios' GameCube title is the obvious choice. As if the *Metroid* series hadn't done enough pioneering, this is the title that showed how compelling the Metroidvania formula could be when translated into a 3D world.

Obscure ODDITIES

OFF-KILTER ENTRIES TO EXPAND THE METROIDVANIA CANON

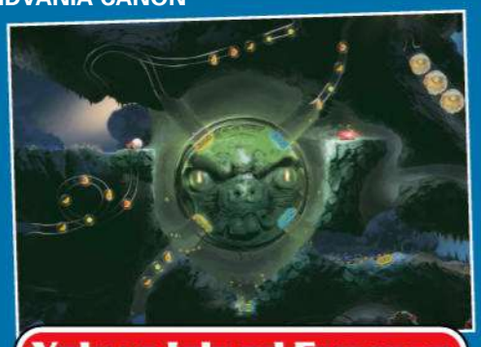
Wario Land 3

Owlboy developer Simon Andersen cites this 2000 Game Boy Color title as one of his favourites. "While its levels were separated by a select screen, you were essentially exploring open dungeons that were unlocked as you gained new abilities. It's also completely unique in that you had no form of health, allowing you to be crushed and moulded into new shapes by the environment to get to new locations".



Arac

Also known as *Spiderbot* in the US and Taiwan, this 1986 C64 proto-Metroidvania is unusual in that you had to acquire new exploration abilities by capturing animals. The robot you control can fire a net to capture creatures and then harness their talents to dig, jump higher and so on.



Yoku's Island Express

This 2018 title from Villa Gorilla is proof that you can actually merge the Metroidvania with other genres. It is essentially a pinball game melded with the exploration and platforming you'd expect from a Metroidvania. An unusual combination, but one that works fantastically well.

Developer INTERVIEW

SIMON ANDERSEN • ART DIRECTOR AT D-PAD STUDIOS

WHAT APPEALS TO YOU ABOUT METROIDVANIAS AS A PLAYER AND DEVELOPER?

I have always been drawn in by bizarre worlds that you're able to understand more of the deeper you look. While I don't mind being led towards a conclusion, there's something really satisfying about being lost in a place that fascinates, letting you choose a path that could lead to more answers. The challenges also tend to be tied to the games' central mechanic, so there's less of a need for arbitrary compensation challenges like fetch quests or escort missions. It's taking the best parts of a combat platformer, but letting you take in and learn about the areas you would otherwise sprint past in more linear experiences.

OWLBOY APPEARS TO BE A GAME WITH RETRO INSPIRATIONS. TO WHAT EXTENT WERE OLD METROIDVANIAS LIKE _METROID_ AN INFLUENCE ON IT?

Owlboy was in large part created as a means to explore what could be done with pixel art back when the medium was on a fast track to being declared obsolete. Part of that thought process was considering what advantages it had, and one thing that stuck was flight. The rumour of a 3D *Kid Icarus* game was circulating, and our idea was that it would be a lot easier to fly around a crowded corridor if you could see that corridor from the side in a 2D perspective. *Kid Icarus* on the NES also served as a bedrock for that idea. What if you could play through its vertical structure, but be able to freely move back down? Enter all those hidden doors? Go into whatever dungeon you wanted without it being linear?

Two other games that had major influences were *Chrono Trigger* and *Majora's Mask*. In both games, there was a central threat that was being built towards and was known to the player, but the games were really about discovering more about the world's people and your closest friends.

WHAT ARE ONE OR TWO OF YOUR FAVOURITE METROIDVANIA GAMES AND CAN YOU EXPLAIN WHAT YOU LIKE ABOUT THEM?

Metroid Fusion, which I absolutely love. The space station setting allowed for a lot of variation in terrain and playing on the mixture of technology and nature. The SA-X encounters were very striking, and returning to older areas and seeing how they had changed really captured you in the moment.

I'll throw in a curveball as well. While not completely open as you still had to select missions, *Megaman Zero* and *ZX* were two really interesting dives into the genre that I really enjoyed. It took the fast-paced elements from the *Megaman X* series and gave some breathing room to focus on story and time to take in what the world you were exploring was meant to tell you.

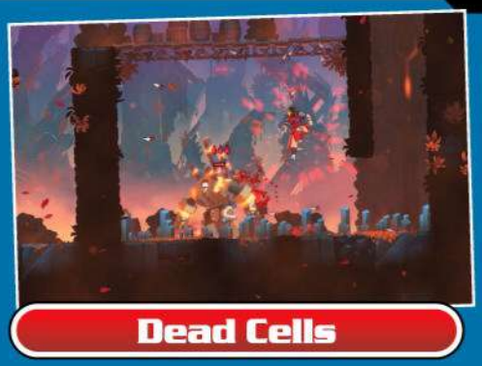
primarily led by indie developers. "While it's difficult to say for certain, I suspect *Cave Story* had a major influence in its revival," says Simon, referring to Daisuke Amaya's retro-inspired cult hit, originally released in 2004. "*Cave Story* was often pointed to as the first 'indie' game in the sense that people know it now. Having a long development cycle, being created by a single person, and achieving mainstream success. If you look at a lot of the independent studios

» [Xbox 360] *Shadow Complex* was one of the big early hits for Xbox Live Arcade.

» [PC] Spending a decade in development made you wonder if *Owlboy* could meet the level of anticipation. Thankfully, it did.

AM2R

■ Created by Milton Guasti, otherwise known as DoctorM64, *AM2R* (*Another Metroid 2 Remake*) is an unofficial remake of *Metroid II: Return Of Samus*, done in the style of *Metroid: Zero Mission*. Nintendo wasn't too happy about it, but the decade long project has been highly praised by critics and helped land its creator a job at the developer of the *Ori* series, Moon Studios.



Dead Cells

■ Given the importance that level design and the way that links to your abilities in Metroidvanias, you would think that developers would need to maintain an iron hand over the structure of the game world. *Dead Cells* shows that that's not the case, mixing the procedural generation of roguelikes with the exploration of Metroidvanias. It sounds like it shouldn't work, but it does.

"THERE'S A WEALTH OF TITLES IN 3D AND OTHER 2D PERSPECTIVES THAT CONTAIN ELEMENTS FROM METROIDVANIAS THAT MUTATE INTO NEW FORMS"

Simon Andersen

that popped up during that time, many felt they now had an example of home tools allowing you to achieve your dreams.

"Most indie developers relied on pixel art as it was what the tools could allow, and that lent itself to abstract spaces. Considering how few resources there were, most had to figure out things from scratch, and ended up experimenting with games based on basic movements and iterating from there. For people that wanted to make stories, detailed worlds and a sense of scale, starting out with platform movement, a Metroidvania is a pretty natural fit for those ideas. If you look at the timeline, after the release of *Cave Story*, multiple, almost decade-long projects emerged who all have Metroidvania elements in one way or another."

Indeed, as we reached the end of the Noughties, there was a growing glut of great indie Metroidvanias. Chair Entertainment's *Shadow Complex* was a huge success for Xbox Live Arcade when it was released in 2008 (though admittedly, having been acquired by Epic Games before its release, they were technically no longer an 'indie') and was followed by another successful Xbox Live Arcade title featuring anthropomorphic creatures in the form of *Dust: An Elysian Tail* (2012). The following year we got Drinkbox Studio's Mexican-inspired luchador title *Guacamelee!* and part-*Minecraft*, part-Metroidvania 3DS and PC game *Steamworld Dig*. Thomas' atmospheric and

» [PC] Take a dung beetle delivering post, add in some pinball mechanics, and somehow you get a fantastic Metroidvania.

innovative *Axiom Verge*, *Ori And The Blind Forest* and *Environmental Station Alpha* followed in 2015; D-Pad's pixel-art delight *Owlboy* in 2016; *Hollow Knight* in 2017; *Steamworld Dig 2*, *Guacamelee 2*, *Dead Cells*, *Iconoclasts*, *Yoku's Island Express* and *The Messenger* all hit in 2018; Koji Igarashi returned with his Kickstarter funded *SOTN* spiritual successor *Bloodstained: Ritual Of The Night* in 2019, along with *Gato Roboto*, *Headlander* and *Blasphemous*; and we've had *Ori And The Will Of The Wisps* and *Carrion* in 2020. In short, Metroidvanias have made a stunning return to prominence.

Metroidvanias games are not only back in full force in their 2D side-scrolling form, but have had a profound impact on big-budget 3D games. As well as superb 3D examples of the genre – most prominently, the *Batman: Arkham* series – they have had a broader influence on modern game design. "Even while they might not be pure Metroidvanias, we see a lot of design elements lifted over into triple-A games today, as general 'good design'," Jens argues. "The whole *Dark Souls* series is very Metroidvania-like, and many of the big open-world games have Metroidvania elements."

Arkane Studio's 2017 game *Prey* is another great example, cited by Thomas as one of his favourites. "It's got a lot of Metroidvania-style exploration but it also lets you go off the rails to a large degree and do stuff you 'shouldn't'. It's fascinating to me how there are things within the skill tree that open up exploration even further – like the high jump or the ability to open up higher level security doors – and the skill points themselves are found largely by exploring."

"There's a wealth of titles in 3D and other 2D perspectives that contain elements from Metroidvanias that mutate into new forms," says Simon on the state of Metroidvanias today. "If you really squint your eyes, even games like *Dark Souls* share a lot of this DNA with an interconnected web of paths, optional encounters, progressing upgrades and a depth to the universe hidden in its structure rather than through blatant narration. Where would one put *Blasphemous* on that spectrum? Or *Carrion*? How would you feel about *Hyperlight Drifter* if it was a side-scroller? It's easy to try to think of new ways to categorise these differences, but to me, the important thing in all of this is that we discovered something new, and that element could enrich new experiences in surprising ways." ✱

ULTIMATE GUIDE:

MEGA MAN II

Dr Wily is trying to take over the world with his Robot Masters, and only the blue bomber can stop them! Find out how this superb sequel surpassed the original and launched a beloved series

Words by Nick Thorpe

If you ever need to convince someone that second chances are worthwhile, *Mega Man II* might just be the perfect piece of evidence.

It seems crazy to imagine now that Capcom's blue bomber is a beloved fixture of the gaming world, but the original *Mega Man* (or *Rockman*, in Japan) was not a particularly successful game, despite earning some critical praise. In fact, sales were low enough that Capcom couldn't justify the production of a sequel – in fact, it was only after an appeal to management that development was permitted, and even then the team had to work on other projects.

Faced with these limitations and a short development period, the team chose not to reinvent the wheel. *Mega Man II* adopted the shooting-heavy platform game template of its forebear, which was hardly a bad thing – it had been received well, and only needed minor adjustments to captivate players. To speed development along, the team utilised unused concepts from the original game, such as enemy designs. Capcom also invited fans to send in

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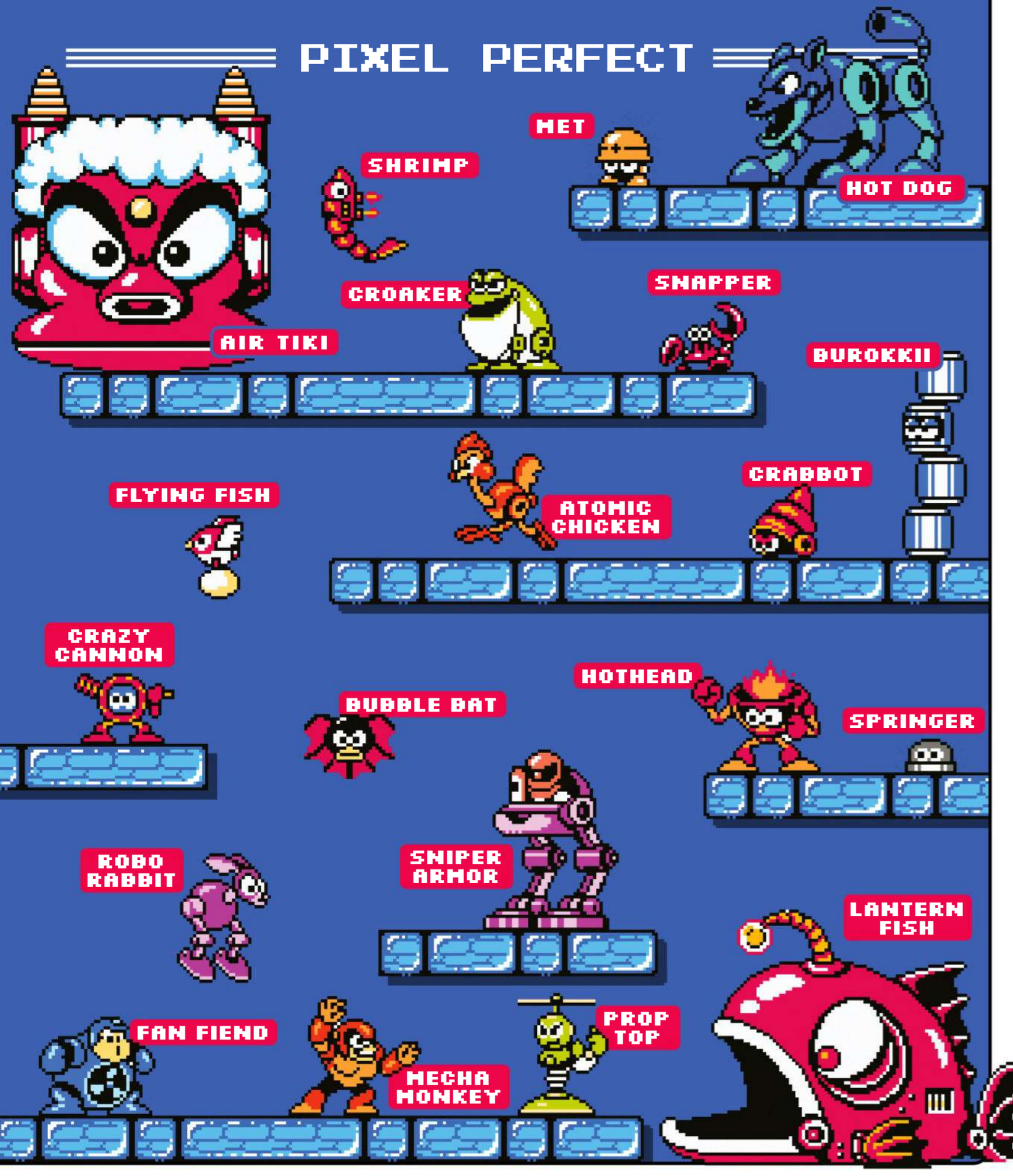


BOSS RUSH

In order to get to Dr Wily, you're going to have to get past his hand-picked guardians – and he's picked quite a few…

METAL MAN

■ This boss hangs out in a factory, and loves to throw circular blades to chop his opponent down to size – and unfortunately, that means you.

HOW TO BEAT HIM If you get in close, he'll leap to the other side of the screen making his blades easy to dodge. Shoot him as he lands – easy.

AIR MAN

■ This windbag uses a fan to generate mini-tornado attacks. These can be pretty hard to dodge, so he's more than just hot air.

HOW TO BEAT HIM Air Man attacks a set side of the screen. Once you've dodged his barrage, he'll move and you can attack him from behind.

CRASH MAN

■ You might expect this guy to glitch the game, but he's actually a mad bomber with a real appetite for destruction – a truly dangerous foe.

HOW TO BEAT HIM Crash Man jumps and retaliates with a bomb when you shoot. We'd advise you to use the Air Shooter against him.

BUBBLE MAN

■ We're not quite sure what's supposed to be so deadly about bubbles – maybe corrosion? Still, this chap puts up a good fight.

HOW TO BEAT HIM Bubble Man fires bubbles in a wave pattern, but these are pretty easy to dodge since the fight is underwater.

HEAT MAN

■ This hothead can turn himself into a shooting flame, and has a burning desire to see your energy bar go up in smoke.

HOW TO BEAT HIM Heat Man will fire some shots, then blaze across the screen. To cool him off, we'd recommend using the Bubble Lead.

WOOD MAN

■ No, not a lumberjack – this oddball is genuinely threatening thanks to his ability to cloak himself with leaves while still attacking you.

HOW TO BEAT HIM As well as shooting leaves at you, Wood Man will drop them from above. With Atomic Fire, you can take him out.

FLASH MAN

■ Thankfully, indecent exposure isn't what this Robot Master is all about – instead, he rather likes stopping time to put Mega Man on the back foot.

HOW TO BEAT HIM He leaps about the screen firing at you and stopping time to confound you. The flexibility of the Metal Blade is your friend here.

QUICK MAN

■ This speed freak likes to jump around and throw boomerangs at Mega Man – an odd method of attack, but one which proves surprisingly effective.

HOW TO BEAT HIM This guy isn't easy to topple, but he can be defeated relatively quickly with smart use of the Crash Bomb.

PICOPICO-KUN

■ The second line of defence at Wily's fortress. This enemy isn't big, but it comes in numbers and it only gets tougher to beat as time goes on.

HOW TO BEAT HIM Use the Metal Blade for aiming flexibility, or if you're feeling spicy, the Bubble Lead will inflict a one-hit kill.

MECHA DRAGON

■ The first guardian of Dr Wily's lair is this large and rather terrifying piece of flying, fire-breathing machinery.

HOW TO BEAT HIM Don't bother attacking until the dragon has stopped chasing you. Once you're one-on-one, you can use your regular arm cannon to defeat it – just time your jumps well to avoid the fireballs it shoots.

BOOBEAM TRAP

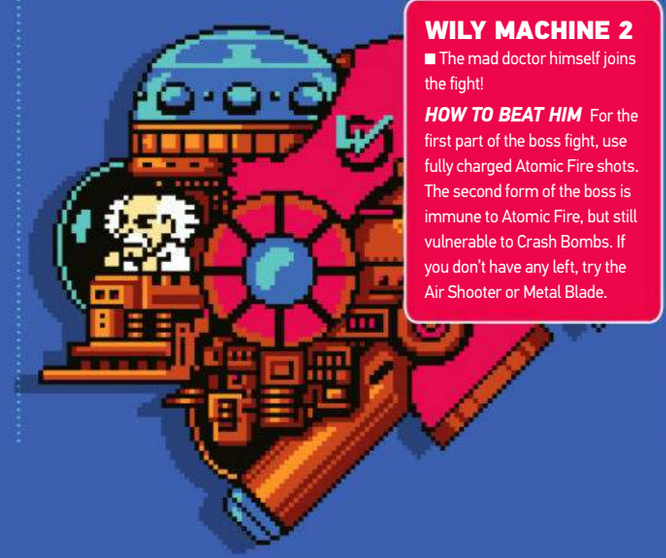
■ The most unusual boss in the game, consisting of wall-mounted laser cannons, and one of Wily's final traps.

HOW TO BEAT HIM Strategy is needed here. You have seven Crash Bombs, and you need all of them – two to destroy walls, and five to destroy the beam cannons. Don't waste your ammo!

GUTS TANK

■ Boss three in Wily's defensive line is this lumbering thing. It shoots projectiles from its mouth and releases enemies from its chest.

HOW TO BEAT HIM The Quick Boomerang is probably the best weapon to use here. To damage Guts Tank, you need to attack its head. You might wish to stand atop the tank's treads before jumping.



WILY MACHINE 2

■ The mad doctor himself joins the fight!

HOW TO BEAT HIM For the first part of the boss fight, use fully charged Atomic Fire shots. The second form of the boss is immune to Atomic Fire, but still vulnerable to Crash Bombs. If you don't have any left, try the Air Shooter or Metal Blade.

ALIEN

■ Could Dr Wily have been an impostor? It appears so as he transforms into the Alien, Mega Man's final foe. It flies about in a figure of eight pattern.

HOW TO BEAT HIM Only the Bubble Lead will damage the alien. Not only are the other weapons ineffective, they'll actively hinder your efforts by refilling the alien's health!

> **“A nonlinear structure might not seem like a big deal, but it wasn’t common in the Eighties”**

their concepts for Robot Masters – the mechanical bosses of the *Mega Man* world – and used tweaked versions of those in the game.

The setup for the game is simple. Following his defeat in the previous game, series antagonist Dr Wily decides to regroup and take out Mega Man. However, instead of taking over other robots, this time Wily has built his own Robot Masters: Air Man, Bubble Man, Crash Man, Flash Man, Heat Man, Metal Man, Quick Man and Wood Man. The benevolent Dr Light sends Mega Man off to defeat them, and put the dastardly Wily back in his place.

Each of the eight Robot Masters has a level which fits their overall character – Metal Man’s stage is an industrial area full of conveyor belts and mechanical hazards, whereas Air Man’s stage requires you to negotiate sky-high moving platforms over bottomless pits. Likewise, Bubble Man’s stage dips underwater and Quick Man’s stage is filled with hazards that strike suddenly. The end of each stage involves a showdown with the boss, and victory allows you to claim a cool new power-up. Since *Mega Man II* inherits a nonlinear structure from the original, you can choose to tackle these stages in any order.

In today’s environment of open world, open-ended games, a nonlinear structure might not seem like a big deal, but it wasn’t at all common in the late Eighties. What’s more, it was a blessing – *Mega Man II* is quite difficult, but the challenges are varied. You can choose to prioritise what you’re good at if you’re more skilled at certain tasks, such as precision platforming or combat. Alternatively, you can tailor your style to the power-up rewards you get for beating bosses – with the right weapon, you can tear the Robot Masters to shreds in a matter of seconds, making this a very viable

» [NES] Things can get hectic when enemies like the Lantern Fish spawn new enemies of their own.

MEGA SPEEDS

This speedrunner, known on Twitch and Twitter as cyghfer, can beat the game in just 26:37!

When did you first encounter *Mega Man II* and what did you think of it?

I knew of *Mega Man* as a kid, but since I started having an impact on our household’s videogame purchases during the N64 era, it wasn’t a series that was really on my radar. It was much later, during a period of exploring NES games via emulation, that I played through all six NES *Mega Man* titles. *Mega Man II* definitely made the biggest impression on me.

What makes the game well-suited to speedrunning?

Mega Man II is a game with simple movement on the surface but a wealth of deceptively difficult tricks when you attempt to push the game to its limit. The most fundamental trick used to progress quickly through the game is the horizontal zip, where you manoeuvre Mega Man into a ceiling in one of several ways and then kick off a sequence where Mega Man moves rightward one tile per frame – that is to say, very fast.

One of the other main attractions of the *Mega Man II* speedrun is its varied and interesting set of boss fights. Almost every Robot Master fight in the game requires interesting and difficult movement to take down optimally, or to react favourably to a wide array of random patterns. *Mega Man II* is among the most competitive speedruns from the 8-bit/16-bit era, and it is a game that demands persistence and rigor from the player.

How much practice have you put in to reach your personal best time?

I would estimate that my total amount of time put into the *Mega Man II* speedrun is around 2,000 hours, give or take 500 in either direction. This includes initially learning the game, investigating possible strategy and route improvements, practicing the game, and doing runs. Probably around 40% of that consists of practice.

What are the common stumbling points when you’re trying to put together a run?

The most notable sections in the run where run-ending mistakes occur are the ‘open air’ section in the Air Man stage, the start of the Crash Man stage, the three screens with the fire-breathing dogs in Wood Man, the major tricks in Wily 1, and many screens in Wily 4. However, there are many more spots that won’t usually outright ‘kill’ a run, but where significant mistakes still occur frequently: the rest of the Clash Man stage, the Quick Man stage fight, the ‘item-2 zip’ in the Bubble Man stage, more spots in Wily 4, and many spots in the Wily 5 refights. Really, the run can die anywhere.

Do you think there’s much scope for improvement on your time, and do you plan to try beating it?

A few years ago, these kinds of times would have been considered nearly unbeatable, and all competition would have more or less died out barring significant new strategy discoveries. However, our collective level of consistency and knowledge has risen to the point where the frontier for a realistic time in *Mega Man II* appears to be somewhere around 26:25.

When I returned to *Mega Man II* speedrunning late last year, my best was 27:01. I pushed hard to lower my best time to the 26:37 I have today, and I needed a break from the grind. But I’ve come to realise that pushing myself in *Mega Man II* is one of the endeavours that gives me the most meaning and joy in life.

POWER-UPS

You'll need some help to beat Dr Wily, and these pick-ups prove to be just what you need

ITEMS

EXTRA LIFE

■ The most vital pick-up in a game of this difficulty! Grab a Mega Man head and you'll get an extra chance to beat the game.

E-TANK

■ Treasure these brilliant pick-ups – they'll give you a full energy bar on demand, which can be as good as an extra life.

ENERGY REFILL

■ These come in two sizes – pellets refill a small amount of energy, while capsules give you a bigger boost.

WEAPON ENERGY REFILL

■ Much like the energy refills, but for the weapon you're currently using.

WEAPONS

METAL BLADE

■ Not only does this absolutely shred a number of bosses, it allows Mega Man to fire in various directions, making it an outstanding weapon.

AIR SHOOTER

■ This tornado attack is great for taking out airborne enemies, as it rises up diagonally once it's been fired. It's situational, but good when necessary.

ATOMIC FIRE

■ This weapon allows you to unleash a powerful charged shot that can devastate enemies, but beware: charged shots require extra energy.

LEAF SHIELD

■ This weapon encircles Mega Man in protective leaves, blocking most minor attacks, and can be hurled at enemies once used.

CRASH BOMBER

■ This works as normal if fired straight at a baddie, but it can attach to walls and other objects for a delayed explosion, which is useful.

TIME STOPPER

■ This one does exactly what it says on the tin – time is frozen, and any nearby enemies along with it. You can't attack while the Time Stopper is working, though.

BUBBLE LEAD

■ A bubble arcs out of your cannon and travels along the floor, damaging whatever it comes into contact with. Good for hitting tiny enemies.

ITEM 1

■ This allows Mega Man to create a temporary platform that floats gently upwards for a few seconds. Up to three can be used at once.

QUICK BOOMERANG

■ Useful in close-quarters combat, due to its limited range. When fired, a barrage of pink boomerangs appears.

ITEM 3

■ This item gives Mega Man the ability to create wall-climbing platforms – less useful than the other two, but situationally excellent.

ITEM 2

■ Item 2 enables Mega Man to create a platform which rockets off in the direction it's facing after a moment to allow Mega Man to get on.

strategy. This only lasts so long, though – once the Robot Masters are taken care of and Mega Man is fully powered up, your final challenge is a linear run through Wily's lair on the way to the ultimate fight.

The one major complaint that many players had about the original *Mega Man* was that it was too difficult. *Mega Man II* includes a number of features to reduce the frustration factor. Perhaps the most important is the E-Tank, an iconic item that can be picked up and used later to fully restore energy – a literal lifesaver when used judiciously, and the only way to gain energy during a boss fight. Then there are Item 1, Item 2 and Item 3 – dull names for sure, but they allow for the creation of platforms that can allow Mega Man to skip past tricky parts of stages, and access otherwise unreachable items. Further still, the international release has a difficulty setting which reduces the resilience of enemies compared to the Japanese games. It's still not an easy game, and some sections remain infuriating, but it's certainly far more reasonable than the original.

That reduced frustration allowed players to more easily appreciate not only playing the game, but the sights and sounds along the way – and they were special in their own right. The series' signature cartoon graphics are best expressed by the larger sprites, but even the relatively small ones like the Robot Masters are packed with personality. As for the music, the tunes are amongst the best conjured from the NES – high energy, memorable ditties with an upbeat feel that matches the on-screen action well. These have inspired a huge number of fan remixes and covers, and are frequently cited when discussing classic videogame music.

Mega Man II was released in Japan in December 1988, and like its predecessor it was popular with the critics. *Famitsu*'s four reviewers gave scores of 6, 7, 8 and 7 for a total of 28/40. Western reviews were more enthusiastic, though. All four reviewers in *Electronic Gaming Monthly* offered the game 8/10 when the game arrived in the US in mid-1989. When the game finally arrived in the UK at the beginning of 1991, reviewers were even more effusive in their praise.

» [NES] Good tactics are essential to beating the bosses, including correct weapon selection.

> **“The Mega Man series as a whole owes its continued existence to Mega Man II’s success”**

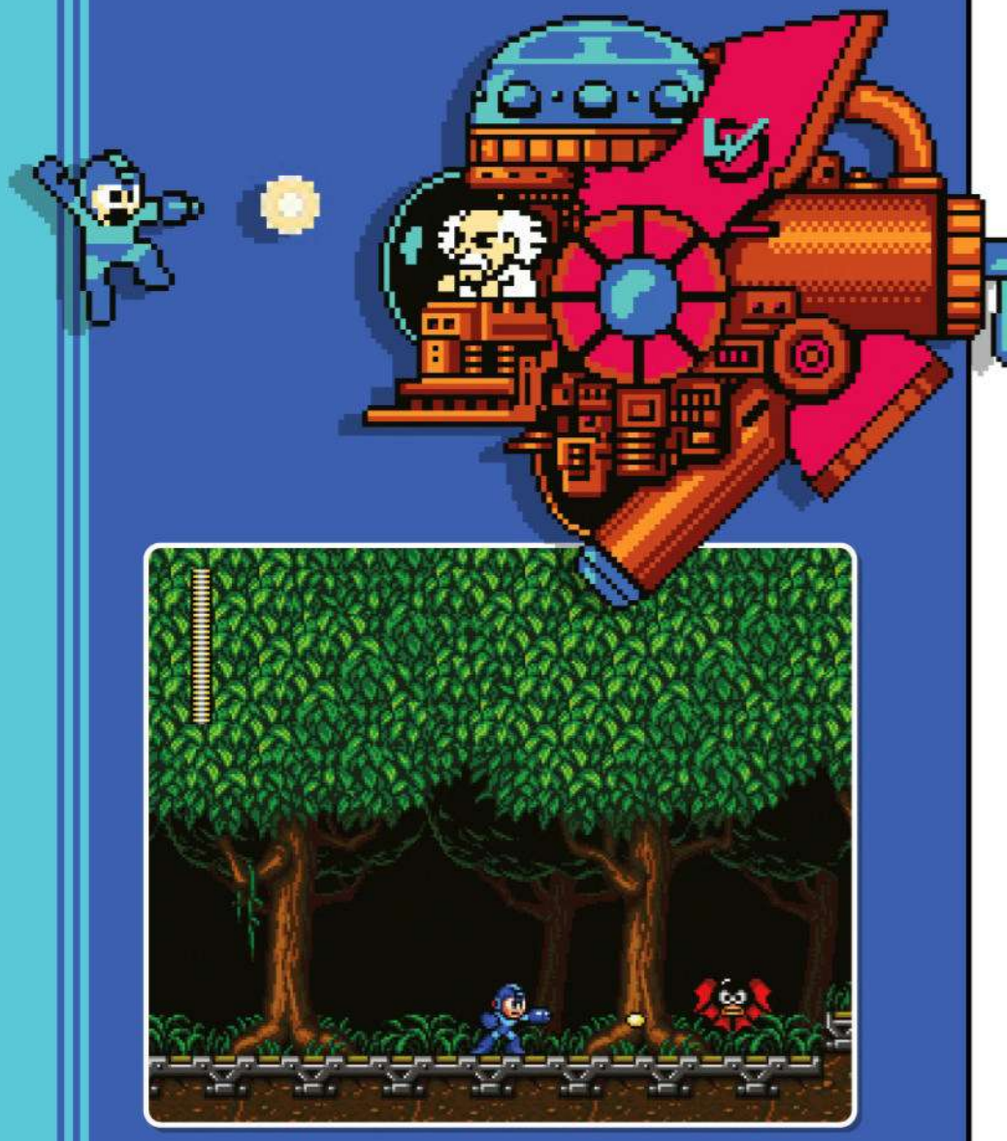
CVG offered the game 95%, and *Mean Machines* also gave it 95%, with reviewer Jaz Rignall commenting that it was “one of the finest platform games ever seen.” *Zero* rated the game 96% and gave a Console Classic award, stating that it has “playability just coming out of its ears”.

This time around though, the sales were there to match. *Mega Man II* would ultimately sell 1.51 million units, making it one of Capcom’s best-selling games ever at that point in time. Only one Capcom NES game sold more copies (that being *Ghosts ‘N Goblins*, with 1.64 million units), and it remains the best-selling game in the *Mega Man* series – but that’s not for a lack of releases, as Capcom’s mascot has starred in literally dozens of games since.

The *Mega Man* series as a whole owes its continued existence to *Mega Man II*’s success – had sales once again failed to meet expectations, that would have been it for the blue bomber. Yet with only some small tweaks, the team was able to follow a struggling game into a smash hit, which is something all too rarely seen today. The result was that *Mega Man* would make four more NES appearances, sticking with the 8-bit platform up to 1993 and creating an unbreakable association in the process – so much so that *Mega Man 9* and *Mega Man 10* went back to the NES style despite being developed for the Wii, PS3 and Xbox 360. As for *Mega Man II* itself, it has been featured in the *Mega Man Anniversary Collection* and *Mega Man Legacy Collection* compilations, making it easy to track down today.

So if you’re already a fan, by this point you’ve probably got a hankering to negotiate the deadly spikes of Bubble Man’s stage again already. But if you’re not a fan, or you’d previously dismissed the game for its admittedly stiff challenge, it’s well worth giving the game another chance. After all, we wouldn’t be talking about this if second chances didn’t lead to good things, would we?

» [NES] We used to like rabbits, until this one started firing carrots at us.



THE WILY WARS

Mega Man II was given a complete overhaul to appear on the Mega Drive – does it still hold up?

While the SNES was receiving brand-new *Mega Man* experiences in 1994, Sega fans who hadn’t yet been acquainted with the character needed to be brought up to speed. As a result, Capcom created *Mega Man: The Wily Wars* (or *Rockman Mega World* in Japan), a compilation containing enhanced remakes of the first three *Mega Man* games and some extra exclusive bosses.

The version of *Mega Man II* in *The Wily Wars* is based on the Japanese release, which means that the difficulty is equivalent to the ‘Difficult’ mode in the NES game. It has been given the full next-gen treatment with completely redrawn graphics, although the arranged soundtrack seems to lose some of the energy of the original compositions. Passwords are out, and battery saves are in.

Mega Man: The Wily Wars is now an expensive and sought-after game – it’s rare in Japan and Europe, and there’s no American release as the game was exclusive to Sega Channel in the region.

THE STORY OF SONIC THE HEDGEHOG

Sega's mascot with attitude has celebrated over 30 years in the spotlight. Let's look back at the impact of the original Mega Drive platform games with Sonic Team head and Mega Drive development veteran, Takashi Iizuka

Words By Nick Thorpe

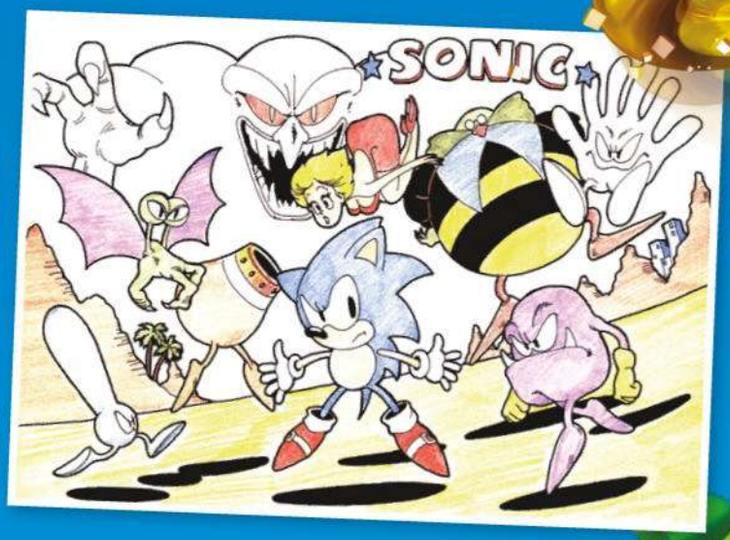
There aren't many games that could be described as revolutionary, and far fewer series – yet the quartet of *Sonic The Hedgehog* platform games on the Mega Drive can justifiably be described as such.

At the highest level, the *Sonic* games had a wide impact that both drove and reflected the changes the videogame market was undergoing in the Nineties. The original game intensified the rivalry between Sega and Nintendo, bringing the two companies to an even footing for the first time, as well as providing an early example of celebrity involvement in game development. The sequel signified the growing globalisation of the videogame market – the game was the result of collaboration between Japanese and American developers, and a full global launch was managed within a week. For *Sonic 3* and *Sonic & Knuckles*, the concept of an expansion pack was pioneered on consoles. However, first and foremost they were platformers featuring fantastic game design and amazing technical achievements.

One of the people who best understands the importance of *Sonic*'s 16-bit era is Takashi Iizuka, a Sonic Team veteran who now heads up development of the series. "While I was seeking employment at Sega, I bought *Sonic The Hedgehog* to understand the job and products of the company, and that was my first encounter with *Sonic*," he recalls. "At that time, I only had a Super Nintendo, so I was impressed by the vivid screen and speedy gameplay of *Sonic*, and I remember thinking that I wanted to make a game like this if I got hired by Sega."

The simple fact that Iizuka only had a Super Nintendo highlights one of the key reasons that Sega needed *Sonic*. After being slow to jump into the 16-bit generation of consoles, Nintendo had arrived – and while Sega had a sales headstart, Nintendo had a more powerful machine. Sega needed to differentiate itself from the competition, and to its credit it was already doing so. The Mega Drive was already catering to older audiences with complex RPGs and sports simulations. What's more, Sega was aggressively advertising against Nintendo.

To advance Sega's agenda of distinguishing its offering from the competition, *Sonic* needed to achieve three things. Firstly, the game and character had to fit into the plan to appeal to a slightly older demographic than the preteen audience associated with Nintendo's machines. Naoto Ohshima's initial designs of Sonic gave him sharp teeth, a human girlfriend and cast him as the vocalist of a rock band. While these harder-edged attributes would ultimately fall away, Sonic's attitude remained – he was impulsive, impatient and cool. "In the Nineties, Mickey Mouse, Pooh, all those animal-themed ▶



» We're glad a lot of these early concept bosses were dropped. Why on earth is Dr Robotnik a bee?

THE MOD SCENE

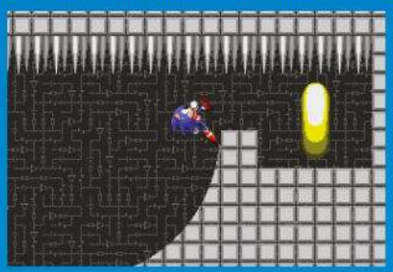
The Sonic community has been producing interesting mods for the Mega Drive games for years – here are five of our favourites

SONIC THE HEDGEHOG MEGAMIX

■ This ambitious team project is a complete overhaul of the original *Sonic The Hedgehog* game, featuring new visuals, music, bosses and gameplay mechanics, as well as a range of additional characters. What's most impressive is that the entire thing has been ported to Mega-CD, allowing anyone with a blank CD-R to play it on actual Sega hardware.

SONIC 1: THE NEXT LEVEL

■ If you want to see how far a Mega Drive can be pushed technically, take a good look at this short, but incredible, effort. The animation in *Sonic 1: The Next Level* is superb, the sampled music is amazingly clear, and some of the special visual effects call to mind Treasure's programming prowess – especially the climactic final boss fight.



SONIC VR

■ Do you consider yourself an expert on everything *Sonic*? Beating this fiendish mod without cheating will prove it. This 'virtual reality training' game gives you a variety a short challenges which test your speed, problem-solving skills and mastery of *Sonic*'s physics. Highlights include challenges such as 'The Pain Train' and 'Roadkill Factory'.

SONIC CLASSIC HEROES

■ Remember the core mechanic of 2003's *Sonic Heroes*, where you controlled teams of three characters instead of individual characters? This impressive technical mod adds that function to the first two *Sonic The Hedgehog* games, allowing you to switch between Sonic, Tails and Knuckles on the fly in order to use their unique abilities, based around speed, flight and power respectively.

BIG'S FISHING DERBY

■ This might just be the craziest mod that we have ever seen – not only does it do away with the Blue Blur (in favour of everyone's favourite big purple cat), it chucks the entire platform gameplay concept out of the window and replaces it with a fun arcade-style fishing game. When you've finished it, try *Big's Big Fishing Adventure 3* for more fun.

» [Mega Drive] *Sonic 2*'s Chemical Plant Zone provided a fine opportunity for Sonic to show off his extra speed.

▶ characters were all friendly and cute, and that was the matter of course," remarks Iizuka. "So seeing Sonic being speedy and edgy in that time, made me feel that he is a character whom has the exact same identity of the company Sega itself. Maybe everyone felt that way at the time too."

The second thing that Sega's new game needed to do was provide a strong demonstration of the Mega Drive's capabilities. The machine had been out for a couple of years, and was a known quantity, but there was no 'killer app' that new consumers could associate with the console. "I think the first *Sonic The Hedgehog*, which was born in Mega Drive, was the title that drastically expanded the possibility of the Mega Drive hardware," says Iizuka. "Although the spec of the Mega Drive hardware was lower than Super Nintendo, the graphics were as good as the Super Nintendo games." This was the joint work of the experienced graphic artist Rieko Kodama, whose previous work included *Phantasy Star* and the *Alex Kidd* games, and relative newcomer Jina Ishiwatari, who would go on to help define the look of the *Sonic* series. "It also achieved screen rotation, which was never done in the previous Mega Drive games," Iizuka continues. This was the responsibility of programmer Yuji Naka, who had cut his teeth on high-profile arcade conversions for the Master System. As well as this technical feat, he was responsible for *Sonic*'s advanced physics and the efficiency that allowed Hirokazu Yasuhara's stage designs to be brought to life.

» [Mega Drive] Sonic's speed was more of a reward than a requirement – the original game often slowed things down.

» Once upon a time, Sonic was going to have a girlfriend and this is what she was going to look like.

» We're big fans of the original *Sonic The Hedgehog* art. It still manages to look fantastic.

"I think Sonic was a title which contributed on improving the quality of future Mega Drive-released titles"

Takashi Iizuka

For the audio, an oft-noted weak point of the Mega Drive hardware, Sega did something incredibly bold and sought celebrity involvement. While Dreams Come True might not be a household name in the west, in Japan the pop band was making huge waves – it had already produced a platinum debut album and was gaining momentum, hiring the bassist and composer for the band, Masato Nakamura was a coup for Sega. The company had licensed music before with games like *Michael Jackson's Moonwalker*, but this was a bigger deal – here was a legitimate star from the wider world of entertainment taking an active role in game creation.

"I think *Sonic* was a title which contributed on improving the quality of future Mega Drive titles," says Iizuka. We can't argue – it's hard to keep track of how many coders have cited the game as a bar against which they measured their own work.

The last thing *Sonic* had to do, and arguably the most important, was crack the American market. Sega was already doing good business in Europe, and the Mega Drive was never going to usurp the SNES in Japan. North America was up for grabs – *Sonic* would be going head to head with *Super Mario World*, and Sega Of America seized the opportunity. A promo tour invited players to try both *Super Mario World* and *Sonic The Hedgehog*, and advertising aggressively compared the two. Tom Kalinske made the call to bundle the game with the console, a move which would boost Mega Drive sales considerably.

It was that success in North America that led to another unusual move – the creation of a truly international game development team. *Sonic The Hedgehog 2* was developed at Sega Technical Institute in the USA, with a variety of Japanese staffers making their way across the Pacific to collaborate with local talent. The arrangement was put together by Mark Cerny, who had previously spent time working at Sega in Japan.

Sonic The Hedgehog 2 was a straight evolution of the original game's concepts. It had more stages, it was more varied and it was faster – but the latter wasn't always a sure thing. Sonic's speed was always something that needed to be used with caution, and in the early stages of the game the team considered making it even riskier by allowing Sonic to be stunned by running into walls at top speed. In the end, they went the other way. Sonic's running speed

RING COLLECTOR

Peter Robinson is the admin of the Sonic Collections Page on Facebook, and owns some incredible Sonic merchandise

What was your first encounter with *Sonic*?
I was eight or nine years old and I begged my mum and dad for a NES one Christmas, but my best friend was getting a Master System, so I got one as well with *Sonic 2*. That's where it all began.

What was the first piece of *Sonic* merchandise you picked up?
Very first was a plush that a friend gave me at school, which I still have. It was Fleetway's *Sonic The Comic* where I really got into the character of Sonic.

What is it about *Sonic* in particular that drew you to collecting?
I used to collect everything from Nintendo to Xbox and had so much that one day, I thought I'd just like to concentrate on one particular character. Sonic has always been my favourite videogame character, even when the games have dipped quality-wise. I guess it's because it's the first game I played, what I grew up playing and in the Nineties there wasn't much around that was cooler than the blue fella.

How many *Sonic The Hedgehog* items do you currently own?
I've never sat and tried to count it all, to be honest. I know Guinness World Records needs 3,000 individual items to consider an entry, I'm fairly sure I'm not far off that including everything – it's just getting the time and patience to go through it all!

Are there any items or curios in your collection that you'd consider particularly unusual or noteworthy?
I've got a few different prototype items, like the ReSaurus action figures and funky bobble heads which I've never seen before, then there's original artwork I own. The fruit machine [inset below] is always a favourite of people who see it too.

Are there any items you're still after but haven't found yet?
One thing I want, and I've always said once I had it I would be happy, is one of the six-foot statues like the one that was at Alton Towers. I've seen a few pop up on eBay but never managed to get one... yet!

» [Mega Drive] Not everyone was a fan of *Sonic 3*'s distinctive-looking art style. Personally, we quite liked it.

cap was listed, and Sonic gained a new move in the form of the Spin Dash – a variation on Sonic's trademark spin attack that could be launched from a standing start, providing instant momentum and a new way to attack enemies.

However, the biggest new addition was a little fox by the name of Miles Prower. "In *Sonic 2*, Tails was added as a player character, and along with the two-player versus mode, you were able to play in '1.5 player' gameplay, allowing two players to play at the same time in the normal mode, too," Iizuka notes, and it's an addition that he feels brought a lot to the series. "Titles which you can say, 'Want to play together?' when your friend comes to your place, will be played for a long time, so, personally, I think multiplayer is a meaningful feature. So not only in *Sonic 2*, but also in *Sonic Adventure 2*, *Sonic Heroes*, etc, we added multiplayer features several times in the *Sonic* series. "

***Sonic The Hedgehog 2* was a tough game to develop, with revisions being made right up until the production deadline.** However, it was a resounding critical success – in fact, many players still consider the game to be the finest entry in the series. Why does Iizuka think the game is held in such high esteem to this day? "Game design, level design, graphics – in all aspects, I think that *Sonic 2* exceeded the previous title and had a high perfection," he replies, "but for me, personally, the background music and special stage made *Sonic 2* stand out even more."

It wasn't just a superb game, but a superb piece of gaming business. In order to have the game out in time for Christmas 1992, the company needed to co-ordinate its international launch strategy. While it wasn't a simultaneous worldwide launch, it was as close as you'd get in those days. For the sake of comparison, the comparable blockbuster launch *Super Mario Bros 3* took almost three years to complete its international release – *Sonic 2* took a matter of days. There was no time for hype to dissipate, winning the game six million sales.

THE GANG'S ALL HERE

Meet some of Sonic's weird and wonderful friends

ROUGE THE BAT

■ A treasure hunter and spy who stakes a claim on all the world gems, the only thing more obnoxious than Rouge herself is her painful hotter/colder Easter-egg hunt gameplay. Do yourself a favour and don't Google her without SafeSearch on.

SHADOW THE HEDGEHOG

■ If you've ever wondered what Sonic would look like if drawn by a Linkin Park fan, wonder no more. Shadow is Sonic's edgy nemesis and even got his own game, in which he uses guns and glitches through stuff.

CHARMY BEE

■ 'Why not Charmy *The* Bee?' we hear you cry. While we're not entirely sure what Sega's line of thinking was, we'd suggest it's because the little fool doesn't deserve it and anyone who has heard him witter on in *Sonic Heroes* will probably agree. Charmy is the worst. The *worst*.

KNUCKLES THE ECHIDNA

■ Guardian of the Master Emerald and a friendly rival to Sonic, although Sega took even more liberties with echidna physiology than it did with Sonic – instead of waddling around eating ants as he should, Knuckles is a hard-punching badass

MILES 'TAILS' PROWER

■ A plucky little fox with two tails, which can be spun at high speeds to allow limited flight. He's Sonic's best friend and a master mechanic, hence why he frequently turns up in mechs or planes. He can be a bit of a know-it-all, but he's a loyal sidekick to Sonic all the same.

BIG THE CAT

■ The single greatest character ever created, this lumbering slab of brilliance makes up what he lacks in smarts with sheer determination. His best friend is a frog called Froggy, who frequently runs away – that's why *Sonic Adventure* sees him repeatedly going fishing to find his missing buddy.

E-100 SERIES

■ There have been several playable Robots over the course of the series, but we didn't start playing *Sonic* games to mess around with machine guns and flamethrowers... but then again, *Shadow The Hedgehog* exists so all bets are off.

ESPIO THE CHAMELEON

■ After a few years of designing anthropomorphic animals, Sega decided to pay attention to what the relevant creatures actually look like and how they behave. As a chameleon, Espio is able to disguise himself – he's a self-proclaimed ninja warrior and pretty cool.

VECTOR THE CROCODILE

■ Vector is secretly one of the oldest *Sonic* characters, having originally been designed as the keyboard player in Sonic's band for an unused Sound Test feature in the first game. Still, he finally emerged in *Chaotix* before returning as the muscle on his team in *Sonic Heroes*.

SONIC THE HEDGEHOG

■ The star of the show and Sega's enduring mascot. Factual accuracy was clearly of no concern when designing him – real hedgehogs have a top speed of around 12mph, are not blue and do not wear sneakers. Before his playable debut, he appeared as a mirror ornament in arcade driving game *Rad Racer*.

AMY ROSE

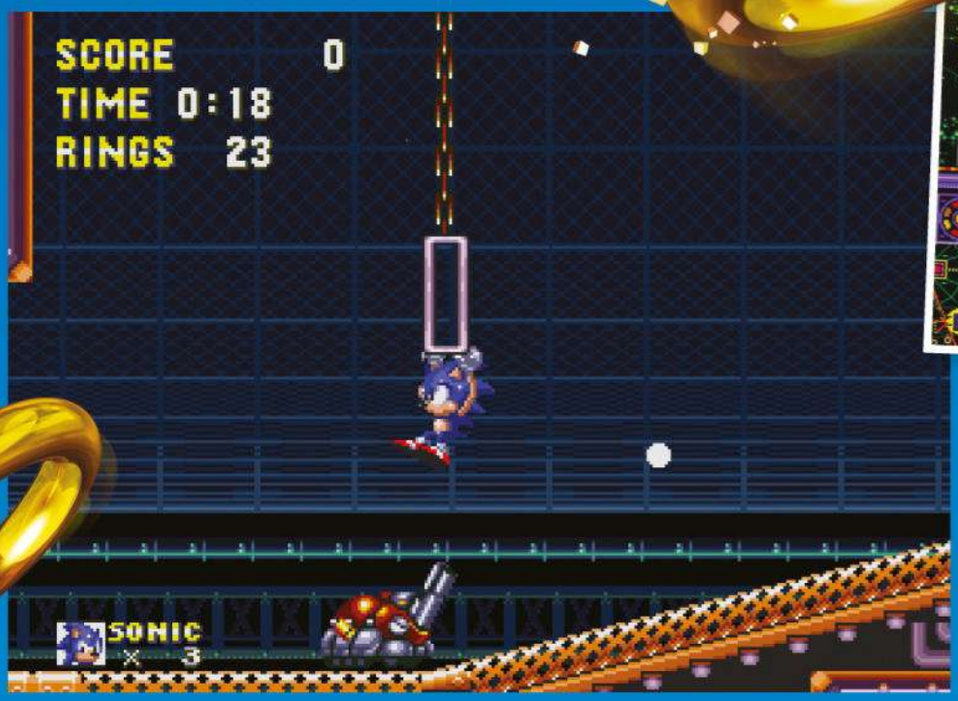
■ Sometimes mistaken as Sonic's girlfriend, Amy is simply besotted with him and while the two are good friends, there's nothing more going on unless you delve into the plentiful fan fiction (for the love of god, never do that). She wields a massive hammer, which she's surprisingly handy with.

CREAM THE RABBIT

■ No, that isn't an instruction. Cream made her debut in the GBA spin-off series, her flappy ears working like Tails' tails in allowing brief flight. She's usually accompanied by the brilliantly named Cheese The Chao, a dapper little chap who is much more likeable than Cream herself.

» The official artwork for *Sonic Spinball*, which was released on the Mega Drive in 1993.

» This early *Sonic* concept art can be found in the rather good *Sonic Gems Collection*.



» [Wii] We'd go as far as to say that *Sonic Colors* is one of the better examples of non two-dimentional *Sonic* games.

The following game would prove to be the most ambitious of the lot – and it was the point at which Iizuka joined Sonic Team. For the young designer who was just coming off of *Golden Axe III*, it was a huge moment. "As noted previously, I did have a feeling that I wanted to make *Sonic* even before I joined Sega, so when I was told that I will be able to work on *Sonic 3*, I was very delighted," he remembers. "Before I went to the USA, my thoughts of *Sonic 3* were expanding, and after I officially joined the team, I was writing several notebooks filled with game design ideas.

"At that time, the very new technology of 3D expression using polygons was investigated," Iizuka continues. It's a surprising admission – the Mega Drive wasn't a machine that was particularly gifted with 3D capabilities, even with additional technology involved. "We weren't able to achieve the goal of having *Sonic 3* be '3 for 3D' but we did achieve 'three for three characters and three routes'." Sonic and Tails were joined by Knuckles, a feisty echidna with the ability to glide and climb walls. "From the beginning of *Sonic 3*'s development, when Knuckles became a playable character, the idea to have his own particular route where only he can go in each stage was confirmed. So to create an ability that makes Knuckles go to places where Sonic and Tails can't go was wall climbing and gliding."

Additionally, players gained the ability to control Tails during flight, allowing for greater exploration of levels. The level designers were stretched thin to accommodate it all. "From a game design perspective, we needed much bigger levels compared to previous titles, and we were challenged to create the multiple routes which can be changed depend on the player character you are using," says Iizuka. What's more, Iizuka notes that the new features created some level design problems that were hard for the team to accommodate for. "It was very fun to create those Knuckles-only routes, but as his ability was too strong, he could climb to where he shouldn't go, and/or use the glide and ignore everything and get to the goal easily… so the debug was very tough."

From a character design perspective, Knuckles stands out as being even more aggressive and hard-edged than the already edgy Sonic, which was a deliberate choice. "He's actually not a villain, but was his first rival," Iizuka points out. "Tails in *Sonic 2* was on Sonic's side and was his little brother-like character, so in *Sonic 3* the idea of creating a rival came very quickly. But we didn't want to have just an enemy character, and we wanted to make him playable too, so we added the story of 'was tricked by Eggman'," – or, for the retro purists, Robotnik. "Knuckles was not made to be a cute character unlike Tails, so we made him look strong and cooler by having dreadlocks. After more than 20 years he is also still one of the popular characters."

The eagle-eyed amongst you will note that Knuckles was not playable in *Sonic 3* – he remains firmly in the antagonistic role from the second you meet him in Angel Island Zone to the moment you topple him in Launch Base Zone. However, that's got

"We needed much bigger levels compared to previous titles, and we were challenged to create the multiple routes"

Takashi Iizuka

» [Mega Drive] By *Sonic & Knuckles*, abstract checkerboards were out and more realistic brickwork was in.

a lot to do with the scale of the game. "*Sonic 3* was aimed to be more epic with larger level and various stages. But because of this, development took longer than expected, and we found out that the amount of the data may exceed the cartridges used at that time," Iizuka remembers. "Unfortunately, we decided to divide the game into two titles." You can see this in *Sonic 3* alone – the level-select screen lists levels that don't exist and Knuckles appears on the end post of every level but can't be played.

"We really wanted to make a complete version with first part and second part combined," Iizuka recalls. Of course, doing so would have been prohibitively expensive – a 32MB cartridge with save memory was enormously costly at the time. "Then Naka-san, who was the main programmer at that time, suggested docking the two cartridges. First we were very worried if that could really happen or not, but when the hardware development team achieved this idea, we were very happy." The second half of the game was thus released as *Sonic & Knuckles*, a cartridge with a cartridge slot on top. It could be used as a standalone game, or combined with *Sonic 3* to make the complete game. There were bonus features, too – owners of both *Sonic 3* and *Sonic & Knuckles* could play the Doomsday Zone, a final battle that was only accessible through the combined game, and Knuckles could be added to *Sonic 2* ▶

» [Mega Drive] Knuckles was always intended for *Sonic 3*, but finances and deadlines made this impossible, he was made playable in *Sonic & Knuckles*.

SUMMER OF SONIC

Sonic even has his own own convention – we speak to its organisers to find out more

How and when did Summer Of Sonic originate?

Svend Joscelyne: Summer Of Sonic originally started in 2006 as a one-off fan project I created to celebrate Sonic's 15th Anniversary. Back then, it was just a website, not a live convention – a collaboration between different fan sites that wrote interesting articles, interviewed Sega and Sonic Team celebrities, and held contests. We even had a virtual birthday card for Sonic that users could sign.

What prompted you to turn the event into an offline convention?

SJ: It wasn't really our intention to pivot from an online website to a live convention; we just reused the name for the 2008 event because it was too good to use for a two-week project!

The idea for a live event came when a meeting of like-minded *Sonic* fans, who previously only knew each other online, got a bit out of hand. What started out as four guys turned into about 30 people dominating a pub, after word had spread. It made me realise that Sonic was actually bringing people together, years after we were all playing the games on our Mega Drive consoles.

With the help of Adam and Kevin Eva (who was the Sega community manager at the time), we set out a plan in 2008 to hire a hall and decorate it so these 30 people could have their own space to hang out. Of course, word spread again and we ended up having to fit 300 people in a 200-capacity space! Good times.

What sorts of things generally take place at Summer Of Sonic?

Adam Tuff: A wonderful aspect of the *Sonic The Hedgehog* universe is the variety of media he has appeared in. The result is that Summer Of Sonic has become a celebration of a multitude of aspects – not just the videogames! The fanbase is extraordinarily talented, and so we encourage guests to show off their skills with art and cosplay contests. We have been extremely fortunate to be able to use Summer Of Sonic as a platform to show off new and upcoming titles – a feature that always attracts large crowds. We also have an incredible line-up of Sonic celebrities from every corner of the franchise, including members of Sonic Team, composers, artists and voice actors. We have even attracted big *Sonic The Hedgehog* names like Yuji Naka, one of the creators of Sonic, and the current head of Sonic Team, Takashi Iizuka.

Do you get any support from Sega?

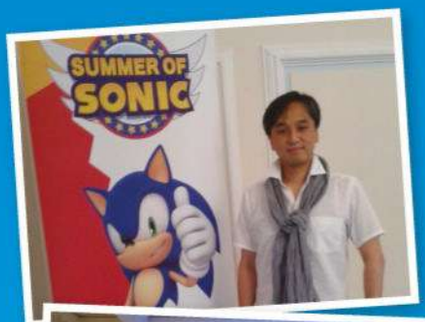
AT: Sega have been such an incredible source of support financially and logistically. We've worked with so many enthusiastic people from Europe, America and Japan, and every event always feels like such an immense team effort. We cannot thank all those involved enough!

How has the event changed over the years?

SJ: We've really come a long way since 2008. Back then, we just had a small hall, a stage and a Mega Drive hooked up to a projector. As the years went on, the venue has increased five-fold and Sega's support became stronger as we became a pseudo-official event. This fan project is often listed in press releases alongside official Sega America events, it's mad! The Sonic team is especially appreciative of the event, which for us is incredibly humbling.

Just as important are the things that haven't changed. The Summer Of Sonic crew has largely been the same since 2008, so we now have the experience and camaraderie to put on a good show. It just feels like a group of best friends throwing a party.

We've also never taken our sights off of what makes Summer Of Sonic the exciting show it is. For us, it's all about fans meeting up in one place to make friends and have fun. Everything else is gravy, but as long as we focus on that core element, we always have a show that makes *Sonic* fans feel welcome.



THE BEST OF SONIC TODAY

It's fair to say the Sega mascot has had his ups and downs, but the present and future of the Blue Blur is looking very bright indeed

SONIC THE HEDGEHOG MOVIE

2020

■ Despite being ridiculed and delayed almost immediately after the first trailer debuted, this big-screen adaptation of *Sonic The Hedgehog* managed to turn around its fortunes and become one of the most successful videogame adaptations of all time. It stars Sonic (voiced by Ben Schwartz) as an interplanetary traveller who ends up on Earth, enjoying a hidden life in Green Hills, Montana. This is disrupted once Dr Robotnik (played by Jim Carrey) learns of the hero and his powers, and goes on the warpath in order to capture him. The film works at being a pretty good kids film, while paying the occasional lip service to long-term *Sonic* fans. Following the success of the first film, a sequel arrived in 2022 that featured Tails and Knuckles.

SONIC MANIA

PS4, XBOX ONE, PC, SWITCH

■ This 2D game celebrates *Sonic*'s past with redesigned versions of classic levels from Sonic's 16-bit platform games, alongside brand-new levels, enemies, bosses and the 'Drop Dash' move that allows Sonic to rocket forward as soon as he hits the ground. Visually, it could pass for a lost 32X or Saturn game, with extra colour and smoother animation pushing *Sonic Mania* past what the Mega Drive could do, and the music is reminiscent of *Sonic CD*.

Green Hill Zone has received a makeover, with Batbrains lurking in an enormous new cavern section. A new boss has been added to the stage, which adds a twist to the old Robotnik wrecking ball template – the two tethered spheres can switch between being the attacker and the target, and swing from a central pivot. However, the big attraction is the brand-new Hollywood-themed Studiopolis Zone. The level is filled with spring bumpers, launch pads and breakable windows, as well as broadcast trucks that can transmit Sonic through satellites. Better yet, the game is also packed with references to classic Sega games – we've seen nods to *Streets Of Rage*, *Dr Robotnik's Mean Bean Machine* and even an old *Sonic* popcorn machine.

Sonic Mania arrived in August 2017 to critical acclaim from the press. No word of a true follow-up has surfaced but we can hold out hope for more *Mania* in the future.

» [Xbox 360] *Sonic The Hedgehog 4* was an episodic release across two separate downloads. This is *Episode 2*.

▶ if you also owned that game. Expansion packs had been commonplace in computer gaming, but not on consoles, and the execution was widely accepted as a good thing. Of course, the team can rest happy too – many fans consider both games part of a whole, rather than two games with a gimmick.

Of course, those things weren't all that *Sonic 3* and *Sonic & Knuckles* brought to the table – new elemental shields gave additional abilities to Sonic, including a double-jump, an air-dash and a bounce attack. Hiding gigantic rings throughout each level for special stage access encouraged players to explore for a bit as well as perfecting their fastest routes. Oh, and a new, less abstract art style pointed towards Sonic's future direction, in which he'd visit realistic cities and interact with humans.

The change of direction in the 3D era has often been a point of contention amongst long-term fans of the series, but in recent history Sonic Team has been using the Mega Drive games as reference material with increasing frequency. Side-viewed gameplay has been employed commonly since *Sonic Unleashed*, *Sonic Generations* gave us glorious updates of classic stages, and *Sonic Lost World* featured an abstract art style that hadn't been seen since the very first games in the series. "3D games are dynamic and the visuals are grand too, but personally I like the 2D game from the Mega Drive era, too, as it is easy to play," says Iizuka when asked about this trend. "We brought up various ideas in the past but with limited hardware spec, so we do have ideas that we weren't able to apply at that time. Even now when I think about creating a new game, I always try to think applying the good part of 3D and good part of 2D to be applied in that new game."

Of course, the influence of Sonic's earlier outings goes much further than that too. Every gaming conference dig can be traced back to the console war that truly fired up when Sonic and Mario were

» [Mega Drive] Sonic dashes his way through Marble Garden Zone because he suddenly remembered he left the kettle on.

put side by side. Every time console games have pushed to obtain an older target age group, that's something that *Sonic* was on the leading edge of – and broadening demographics has been important to the growth of the games industry, whether for reasons of content (such as *Grand Theft Auto*, a game that couldn't be sold to the under-18 audience in good conscience) or appeal (games like *Dr Kawashima's Brain Training*). Five years prior to the co-ordinated international launch of *Sonic 2*, your gaming experience depended heavily on where you lived – you might be playing a NES, a ZX Spectrum, an MSX or something else entirely depending on region. These days, with same-day global launches and region-free consoles, that seems like a lifetime ago. And of course, every time you buy DLC, you might want to spare a thought for *Sonic & Knuckles*. And, of course, all of that is to say nothing of the legion of mascot platform games that came in the wake of the *Sonic* series.

Likewise, the games have brought a generation of creators into the fold. The kids who grew up idolising *Sonic The Hedgehog* are now the kids making games like *Freedom Planet*, and in some cases even working closely with Sega – people like Christian Whitehead and Simon Thomley were raised in the fan scene and have taken a key role in continuing the legacy of those early Mega Drive games, both through direct conversions and with projects like *Sonic Mania*, a love letter to the 16-bit heritage of the *Sonic* series. Whatever Sonic is up to, the historical significance of that quartet of Mega Drive games is assured.

» [PS3] *Sonic & All-Stars Racing Transformed* is easily the best spin-off from the *Sonic* franchise.

But for all of our assessment of Sonic's legacy, it's Iizuka as the guardian of that legacy who truly matters. "I do not want say anything too exaggerated, but I think the *Sonic* games were one of the titles that energised the videogame industry of the Nineties," he concludes. "Especially in the west, by having *Sonic* in the market, the hardware competition of Nintendo versus Sega was very clear, and that lead to the result of having more hardware in the market and many third parties joining to create games on Mega Drive and/or SNES. Of course, this wasn't just because of *Sonic*, but to Mega Drive, I think *Sonic* was a great trigger." A trigger is a fine way to think of it – the Mega Drive was always potent, but *Sonic* propelled it like a speeding bullet into the realm of the all-time great consoles. All these years later, the impact of that shot is still being felt.

ULTIMATE GUIDE

Super Castlevania IV

Remasters are all the rage today, but back in 1991 Konami released a sequel that had more than a whiff of familiarity to it. Join us as we embark on Simon's Belmont's greatest quest of all time

Words by Darran Jones

HANGING SKELETON

HARPY

DULLAHAN

FIRE EYE

Konami's *Castlevania* franchise has a reputation for strong atmosphere, but few games in the series come close to capturing the sheer dark majesty of *Super Castlevania IV* – confusingly, the eighth main game in the series on its release. Fittingly released in time for Halloween in Japan in 1991 and overseen by Masahiro Ueno (who was credited as Jun Furano), the eighth *Castlevania* game is a spectacular addition to the series, even if some fans felt it was something of a step back after experiencing *Dracula's Curse* on the NES.

It's a fair assessment to make, in retrospect, as mechanically *Super Castlevania IV* would have certainly felt a little lacking to anyone that had experienced the branching stages, multiple endings and extra characters that all featured in Konami's third *Castlevania* NES adventure. This is partly because Ueno saw his game as something of a remake of the original NES classic he used to enjoy playing (albeit with a few additional quality-of-life additions), and also because Ueno and his small team began work on *Castlevania IV* while *Dracula's Curse* was still in development. As a result, *Super Castlevania IV* is perhaps best described as a remix or reinterpretation of the NES original, retelling the story of Simon Belmont's fight against Dracula, but adding new stages, bosses and greatly enhanced audio. Think of Ueno and his team as storytellers spinning a yarn to a group of entranced listeners around a campfire, embellishing the well-known tale with additional flourishes that no one in the crowd would have heard before.

This reimagining of the earlier *Castlevania* games – and Ueno played all of them while working on his 16-bit adventure – meant the series returned to its arcade-like origins and dropped the RPG elements that Konami had first introduced in *Castlevania II*. It also meant a more linear structure through each level, which again, was more in line with the exploration that featured in the first NES *Castlevania* game. It's worth remembering, though, that the Super Nintendo was a very capable console compared to the NES, and the added razzmatazz found in

MERMAN

ZOMBIE DOG

SKELETON SOLDIER

» [SNES] The atmosphere is immense. These candles spookily light up as you approach Dracula's resting place.

» [SNES] You've barely started your adventure and this creepy-looking mountain already suggests your journey isn't going to be easy.

the machine's 16-bit innards meant Ueno and his team were able to deliver an adventure that felt suitably different to those games that had come before it, even if there was a distinct whiff of familiarity to some of the locations.

Indeed, one of the most fulfilling aspects of *Super Castlevania IV* is just how epic Simon's quest still feels. While it retains the 2D level structure of every *Castlevania* before it, there's a staggering amount of variety to the game's environments, a diversity that's further enhanced by the game's incredible score. Before you've even reached the drawbridge that leads into Dracula's castle, you'll have traversed a haunted stable, cautiously made your way through an overgrown graveyard, climbed up the slippery stone remnants of an abandoned waterfall, fought through a gigantic cavern and, in one of the game's most stunning setpieces,

» [SNES] In addition to a new score, *Super Castlevania IV* also features remixes of classic tunes.

» [SNES] Even sub-bosses like Puweyxil can provide a stiff challenge if you're not careful.

» [SNES] The interlude map gives clever nods to the environments that await you.

battled skeletons in a revolving underground tunnel. Like *Super Metroid*, which would arrive several years later, the levels of *Super Castlevania IV* somehow feel alive and real, thanks to neat environmental details like leaves blowing in the wind, droplets of water spilling down from stalactites, or the ominous clouds that rush through the darkened skies as you press forward on your important quest. If we had one complaint about Konami's action hit, it's that some of the colour choices feel garish when your quest begins, but this soon fades the deeper you descend into Dracula's sanctum.

If certain elements of this macabre classic do sometimes falter in the graphics department, the same can't be said for *Super Castlevania IV*'s exceptional score. It's a wonderful, eclectic collection of tunes with a tremendous amount of range that truly pushes what you'd expect to hear from the console's S-SMP sound chip. Sampled music in videogames certainly wasn't new when *Super Castlevania IV* debuted, but the sheer ambition of composers

Weapon of Choice

THESE ITEMS WILL GIVE YOU THE EDGE OVER DRACULA'S LACKEYS

Dagger

■ The dagger is one of the first weapons you'll find, and it's a good one. It's fast, accurate and uses one heart when activated.

Axe

■ This bulky weapon is slow and has an tricky trajectory, but it does deliver a decent amount of damage to enemies and it only costs one heart.

Whip Extension

■ Grab these whenever you see them as they enhance the Vampire Killer, making it longer and more powerful for a maximum of two upgrades.

Holy Water

■ For the cost of a single heart, you can rain down pain on your unholy enemies. It has a low trajectory when thrown, so keep that in mind.

Cross

■ This is handy because in addition to damaging anything it hits, it returns like a boomerang, potentially inflicting even more pain on the return trip.

Watch

■ It costs a hefty five hearts to use but it's worth it as this magical device can freeze time and most enemies. It doesn't last long, though.

Boss Rush

KEY DEMONS STANDING BETWEEN SIMON AND VICTORY

Rowdain

The first end-of-stage boss you encounter in *Super Castlevania IV* is a skeletal knight that goes nowhere without his trusty skeletal steed.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:
Fire projectiles at the horse's head while avoiding its flaming fireballs. Once his mount is defeated, avoid Rowdain's leaps and return fire whenever he swings his lance.

Koranot

This gargantuan stone foe awaits you at the end of the Outer Keep stage and is a dizzying scaling Mode 7 showcase.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:
Avoid the rock it throws and the ones that fall from the ceiling when it jumps. Koranot gets smaller (and more nimble) as it takes damage.

Dancing Spectres

Fred Askare and Paula Abghoul (get it?) await you at the end of the sixth stage and have some deadly moves to try out on you.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:
Keep your distance, avoid the three rapiers they throw at you and also keep an eye out for their deadly charge attack. Tricky, but manageable.

Orphic Vipers

Two heads are better than one and it's certainly true for this scaly foe as it can fire both fireballs and a short-range flame at you.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:
Keep to the right, use the axe if you have it and avoid falling off the bottom of the screen. It's a tough early skirmish.

Zapf Bat

This beautiful boss is assembled from numerous jewels, gold and trinkets. It guards the treasury found at the end of the ninth stage.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:
Watch out for its swooping attacks and avoid the gold that falls when you strike it. Eventually it transforms into three smaller bats. Don't change tactics.

Akmodan II

This ancient, embalmed foe hangs out at the end of the clock tower stage and can't wait to wrap you in its dirty bandages.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:
You're limited for space, so keep your distance (its bandages hint where it will teleport) and get in hits where you can.

Slogra

This alien-looking foe can be quite challenging to get past, and is the first of three bosses that guard Dracula.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:
Avoid its sudden drops and keep low to duck its energy blasts. Eventually it will start stabbing you with its beak. Nasty.

Sir Grakul

This knight guards the end of stage seven and is a master of medieval weaponry, using various armaments to defeat you.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:
Avoid the axe he throws and watch out for flames that travel across the floor. He'll eventually draw his sword and try to finish you off.

The Monster

In addition to doing a mighty damn fine impression of Dr Frankenstein's creature, this gargantuan foe also has a nice range of coloured flasks.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:
This is tough. Learn the contents of his three coloured bottles, avoid his deadly punches and look for openings where you can.

Gaibon

Like Slogra, this flying reptile made its debut in *Super Castlevania IV* and would go on to appear in many later games, often paired with Slogra.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:
Avoid its stream of fireballs and the projectiles that fall whenever it lands on the ground. Its attacks amplify massively when it turns red.

» [SNES] *Super Castlevania IV* doesn't introduce many new mechanics but its whip swinging is certainly one of our favourites.

Death

■ The penultimate boss before you reach Dracula is a fittingly tough challenge that needs luck and skill to master. Good luck!

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

Avoid the scythes this reaper throws at you, leap over the giant scythe that is flung your way and pray he falls before you do.

Dracula

■ After slogging through 12 stages of 16-bit brilliance you encounter your final foe. Ready that Vampire Killer, it's gonna be a tough fight.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

Aim for his head, avoid the many projectiles he flings at you and get as close as you can when he teleports. You've got this.

» [SNES] *Super Castlevania IV* is filled with graphical trickery, but Simon's journey through this underground tunnel remains a highlight.

MR HED

▶ Masanori Adachi and Taro Kudo as they attempted to cram an entire orchestra into the SNES – such as organs, woodwinds, brass, pianos, strings, bass and countless other instruments – really can't be faulted. From the complicated composition of *Secret Room* to the haunting melody of *Dripstone Cave* and the foreboding menace of *Dracula's Theme*, the entire soundtrack drips with atmosphere, effortlessly switching from playful and melodic to dark and brooding as Simon's epic journey continues. The score tells a story that's every bit as expressive as the on-screen visuals and it complements the action, too. Can you imagine traversing those gigantic Mode 7 chandeliers without that thunderous piano booming away in the background? Adachi and Kudo's legacy is not only one of the finest soundtracks to grace Nintendo's 16-bit console, but perhaps one of the greatest game scores of all time.

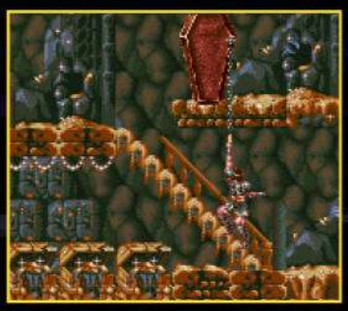
For all its aesthetic splendour it's disappointing that *Super Castlevania IV*'s gameplay mechanics don't share the same evolutionary leap as earlier games in the series. That's not to say Ueno and his team didn't add new things – Simon can now swing his whip in eight directions, flail it around him in an attempt to stop projectiles, and even use it to swing across certain sections of the game – but overall, it does feel like something of a step back after the strides made to expand your exploratory options in *Dracula's Curse*. Of course, the nonlinear focus of that game would rear its head again for both *Rondo Of Blood* and *Symphony Of The Night*, but they're both Ultimate Guides for another time.

Super Castlevania IV's mechanics may not have significantly changed when compared to its predecessors, but they are exceptionally solid, and the tight movement of Simon as well as the mastery of control offered with his eight-way whip attacks ensure that boss fights, of which there are many, are never a chore to experience. In fact, *Super Castlevania IV*'s menagerie of devilish foes were arguably the best that fans of the series would have encountered at that point, and while a few stumbled due to their easy-to-learn attack patterns, they soon begin to put up a stiffer fight once you finally breached the walls of Dracula's castle.

Today, those boss encounters remain just as satisfying to experience, and equally satisfying is the ease with which Konami's game can now be accessed. While its Super Nintendo exclusivity and overall desirability means you'll get little, if any, change from £100 (should you desire a complete, boxed copy), its inclusion on the SNES Mini, as well as M2's excellent *Castlevania Anniversary Collection* for modern consoles, means that Konami's epic adventure is now attainable by anyone, not just those who backed Nintendo's 16-bit machine. With the series having a mini popularity boost with the Netflix show, too, there's no better time to experience Konami's magnificent macabre masterpiece. ✱

RAVEN

WHIP SKELETON



» [SNES] While its early stages can look a little gaudy, Konami's epic adventure can look quite stunning at times.

» [SNES] It's against the law to run a *Super Castlevania IV* article without mentioning these Mode 7 chandeliers.

ZOMBIE

THE COMPLETE HISTORY OF
KIRBY

Kirby has had an eclectic history, starring in a host of games that range from terrible to genius. Ashley Day and Darran Jones find out why it isn't always easy being pink…

He may enjoy a regular release schedule on Nintendo's consoles and even appear loud and proud in the *Smash Bros* series, but Kirby is often not the first character you think of when considering Nintendo's a-team. Mario, Link and even Samus seem to have a strong fan following while the pink puffball seems to fall by the wayside at times. So just why is Kirby relegated to the b-list of Nintendo heroes?

Maybe it's because he's an anonymous looking blob of a character; a blank slate whose personality is defined more by the enemies he eats and absorbs than anything inherent in himself. Maybe it's because he began life on the Game Boy rather than the NES or SNES, creating the impression that he's somehow less of a prime-time star. Maybe it's because all of his games are so easy that they feel like they were designed for infants, rather than the all-ages audience of other Nintendo games. Or maybe it's his track record. Kirby seems to have more cancelled games behind him than any other Nintendo character, and those that do make it onto shelves are of wildly varying quality. The words 'hit and miss' were practically defined by Kirby.

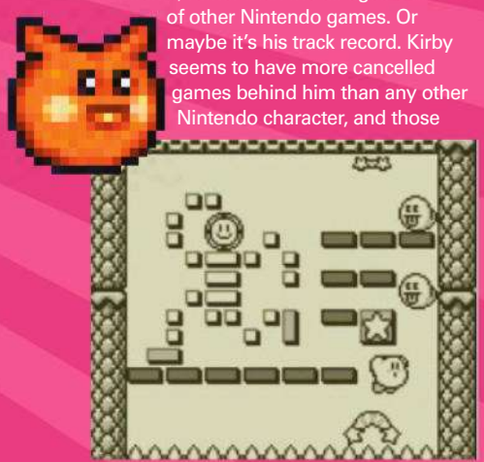
Yet despite all these flaws, Nintendo's unlikely mascot endures. Combined sales of *Kirby* games total over a whopping 40 million. He's proved popular enough to gain his own animated TV show. The desk of this particular **Retro Gamer** writer is decorated with not one but two Kirby plushes. And anyone who plays *Super Smash Bros* with any sense of competition has likely banned Kirby from play for being too darned impossible to knock off the arena.

Three decades into his career, Kirby is defined by one thing: adaptability. Not just in his patented ability to consume enemies and take on their powers and appearance but also in his comfort across a multitude of gaming genres and styles. His classic platformers remain a constant but the round form of Kirby has also seen him take the form of a pinball and golf ball. He's starred in a *Breakout* clone, a *Marble Madness*-style game and one of the most esoteric racers ever created. The plucky guy has even appeared in a game where everything is seemingly made from wool.

Kirby began life as a sprite called Popopo in a game called Twinkle Popopo, which became Kirby's Dreamland

This versatility almost certainly dates all the way back to Kirby's origins. Created by Masahiro Sakurai of HAL Laboratory in 1992, Kirby actually began life as a placeholder sprite called Popopo in a game called *Twinkle Popopo*… Which eventually became *Kirby's Dreamland*. His placeholder nature perfectly explains Kirby's appearance – a simple round blob with stubby limbs and basic facial features has got to be one of the easiest and quickest characters to draw. As development of the game progressed however, Sakurai gradually fell in love with the placeholder design and decided to keep him.

Popopo was eventually renamed Kirby, though Sakurai claims to not remember



» [Game Boy] *Kirby's Block Ball* is one of the few unique interpretations of *Breakout* that exist. Well done, Kirby!

» [Game Boy] *Pinball Land* is part of a lineage of fantastic HAL pinball games, including *Revenge Of The Gator*.

why. Some speculate that he was named after the Kirby vacuum cleaner company, due to his ability to suck up enemies and other objects, while others suggest he is named after the lawyer John Kirby who represented Nintendo in the *Donkey Kong/King Kong* dispute with Universal Studios. The latter theory is certainly the most likely, given that Mario was also named after a close associate of Nintendo's.

Though *Kirby's Dreamland* featured a number of series hallmarks, including Kirby's ability to suck in and spit out objects, as well as the now iconic and oft-repeated tree boss of the first stage, his more popular copy ability was not yet present. Similarly, though Sakurai had envisioned Kirby as a pink character, his debut on Game Boy didn't demonstrate this characteristic and this aspect of the character design was lost outside of Japan, with Nintendo's western arm depicting Kirby as a completely white character on the game's box art and other marketing materials. With flexible origins like this, it's easy to see how Kirby became such a versatile and adaptable hero, capable of appealing to a wide demographic of gamers.

Sakurai originally envisioned Kirby as the star of a basic game that anyone could play, and it certainly shows in *Dreamland*. His ability to float across an entire stage made most of the game free of conflict or obstacle, and the whole thing could be completed in under an hour. Fortunately, the NES sequel *Kirby's Adventure* added some much needed complexity, in addition to Kirby's true bright pink colour. This game, released in 1993, introduced the ability to copy the powers of the enemies Kirby consumed and also introduced a slightly more complex level structure and a host of minigame rooms, which extended the size of the game enough to necessitate a battery-backed save function. It also expanded the cast of characters, the first game's penguin villain King Dedede now joined by anti-hero Meta Knight, who would

» [NES] The Kirby we know and love today really took shape with Kirby's Adventure

KIRBY'S SPIN-OFFS

Kirby has had almost as many spin-off games as he has main platform games. Some may even say that the spin-offs are his best works… And you know what, they'd be right

Kirby's Pinball Land
Game Boy, 1993

Actually the second *Kirby* game ever made, *Pinball Land* proved just how versatile a character Kirby is. This remains one his best games. Programmed by Satoru Iwata at HAL, it followed the developer's other pinball games, *Rollerball* and *Revenge Of The Gator*, and built upon a great track record for multi-level pinball tables that did things totally impossible in the real thing. Three tables, each with their own high score board made this an infinitely replayable classic.

Kirby's Dream Course
SNES, 1994

Originally conceived as a mini-golf game called *Special Tee Shot*, this evolved into something more interesting. In *Dream Course*, players hit Kirby around an isometric golf course, taking out any enemy he strikes, with the final one transforming into the hole. Each hit takes one life while each enemy struck replaces one, rewarding accuracy. The game featured eight courses, with eight holes, as well as another four two-player only eight-hole courses.

Kirby's Ghost Trap
SNES, 1995

Also known as *Kirby's Avalanche* in the US, *Ghost Trap* is a port of Japan's *Super Puyo Puyo*. Before the *Puyo Puyo* series became well-known in the west, developer Compile licensed it to other publishers, who would apply a more well-known property over the top, like Sega's *Mean Bean Machine*, starring Sonic's Dr Robotnik. *Ghost Trap* used sprites and music from *Kirby's Adventure* and *Kirby's Dream Course* but is otherwise a *Puyo Puyo* game.

Kirby's Block Ball
Game Boy, 1995

Yes, *Block Ball* suffered from the same clunky controls of all non-analogue *Breakout* clones but it made up for it with some unique mechanics. Hitting A at the same time as striking a ball would inflate it into a full-sized Kirby, capable of hitting more bricks at once and with more power, while boss battles used four paddles at once, one on each edge of the screen. A huge battery-backed adventure and tons of minigames made it more than just a simple arcade clone.

Kirby's Toy Box
Super Famicom, 1996

A series of minigames that were broadcast on the Super Famicom's Satellaview add-on, *Kirby's Toy Box* included eight minigames, themed around Kirby as a ball, and included such simple games as baseball, pinball and pachinko. Though there was also a nice artillery clone called *Cannonball*. The series was designed to promote the cartridge release of *Kirby Super Star* and can only be played via emulation.

Kirby Star Stacker
Game Boy, 1997

Every Nintendo mascot seems to get their own puzzle game at some point and this was Kirby's (remember that *Ghost Trap* was really a *Puyo Puyo* game). Sadly, *Star Stacker* wasn't very good. With gameplay between *Mario & Yoshi* and Sega's *Baku Baku Animal*, it wasn't simple enough to be instantly accessible but nowhere near complex enough to be engrossing. A Super Famicom remake was made in 1998 but had few improvements.

Kirby Tilt 'n' Tumble
Game Boy Color, 2000

Game Boy Color never really got a proper *Kirby* platformer (a DX remake of *Dream Land 2* was announced but never released) but it did get this interesting curiosity. Featuring a motion sensor in the cartridge itself, it played like a ball-bearing maze game by tilting the entire handheld around. Sadly it never got a European release and the tilt technology makes it highly unlikely that we'll see a digital re-release any time soon.

Kirby Air Ride
GameCube, 2003

Masahiro Sakurai returned to the *Kirby* series after several years away for this odd racer in which the only button was a brake, designed to build up tension on corners before letting go to slingshot out of them. An interesting but unsatisfying idea. A wealth of bonus content, and the way it was unlocked, however, influenced later Sakurai games *Super Smash Bros* and *Kid Icarus: Uprising*.

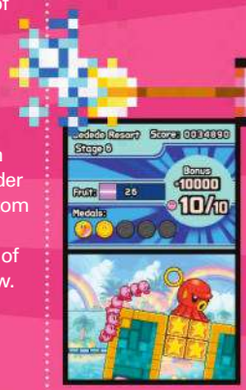
go on to become one of the most popular and iconic Kirby characters.

Two years later, Kirby returned to the Game Boy in *Kirby's Dream Land 2*. Incorporating the copy ability from the NES game, it also expanded the gameplay possibilities by adding three of Kirby's mates to the mix. Rick the hamster, Coo the owl and Kine the fish may be three of the worst names and least memorable characters in Nintendo history but they at least prove invaluable in *Dream Land 2*. Each carries Kirby in some way – he rides on Rick's back, can be carried in the talons of Coo and, most amusingly, can sit in the mouth of Kine as they swim around – and the best thing about this is that when Kirby absorbs the power of an enemy it not only transforms him but also his pal, adding an ability specific to that helper. Such variety and depth makes *Dream Land 2* a great game and it just might be the best of the classic Kirby games.

» [Nintendo DS] We've seen better uses of the DS's touchscreen than this.

Dream Land 2 is also notable as one of the best Super Game Boy-compatible cartridges. When played through the SNES's woefully underused Game Boy-playing peripheral, it added custom borders themed around Kirby's animal chums, included new sound effects such as applause on the title screen and thunder during the end sequence, as well as custom colour palettes that created a stunning ending that used the maximum number of colours the Super Game Boy would allow.

The following year, however, Kirby made his debut on Super NES proper and in a game that saw Sakurai return to the director's chair (*Dream Land 2* was directed by fellow HAL employee Shinichi Shimomura). *Kirby Super Star* (or *Kirby's Fun Pak* as it was known in Europe) was a typically inventive release from Sakurai. Advertised as eight games on one cartridge, its main feature was *Spring Breeze*, an extremely colourful remake of *Dream Land* that incorporated new gameplay features including the copy ability, as well as the option to transform any of those abilities into a helper character that could, if one desired, be controlled by a second player. A few shorter platform games appear on the cart but, more interesting, is the presence of games like *The Great Cave Offensive*, a treasure-hunting adventure game packed with references to other Nintendo titles, or *Revenge Of Meta Knight*, in which Kirby must race against the clock to destroy his rival's spaceship, the Halberd. Packed with countless hours of gameplay across several original game modes, *Kirby Super Star* was naturally popular and, appearing on what was arguably the most owned console of its day, it sold millions and remains a favourite among fans.



» [Nintendo DS] *Kirby Mass Attack* is one of the better Kirby games.

The next game in the core series saw Shimomura return to make *Dream Land 3*, a Super NES sequel that arrived so late in the system's life that it went unreleased in Europe due to the arrival of the N64. Which is a shame because Europe certainly missed out on one of the most attractive SNES games if nothing else. In the post-*Donkey Kong Country* era, Nintendo platform games had to try much harder to stand out visually, which led to the crayon story book feel of Miyamoto's *Yoshi's Island*, while *Dream Land 3* instead used a special and oft-overlooked high-resolution screen mode to bleed colours between pixels, giving the games a pastel-like look that achieved a blurry, dreamlike quality befitting the title. For the gameplay, HAL added three new animal pals to the existing roster, as well as Gooey, a helper character Kirby can summon at the cost of two hit points who fights alongside Kirby, controlled either by AI or another player. In spite of the rich visuals, *Dream Land 3* was exactly what the

> Variety and depth makes Dream Land 2 a great game, and it might just be the best of the Kirby games

KIRBY'S CAMEOS

Being a popular Nintendo mascot, Kirby has made cameo appearances in a number of other games, not least the Super Smash Bros series, which was made by Kirby creator Masahiro Sakurai. Here are some of his others:

- In *The Legend Of Zelda: Link's Awakening*, Link is attacked by an enemy called the Anti-Kirby that can suck him up and spit him out.
- In *Mario & Luigi Superstar Saga* there's a cinema with posters on the wall. One features Kirby in a film called '*Kirby Story*'.
- In the opening to HAL's SNES RPG, two Kirbys can be seen in a crowd of warriors.
- In *Pokemon Stadium 2*, you can view a 3D representation of your character's room. If they own a NES then the TV displays a scene from *Kirby's Adventure*, and if they own a SNES then you'll see a scene from *Kirby Super Star*.
- Kirby is on billboards in the *Super FX* racer *Stunt Race FX*.
- Several Kirby characters appear as the solutions to puzzles in Super Famicom's *Picross Volume 3*.
- In the menu to 3DS augmented reality game *Face Raiders*, three enemies can be seen doing the famous Kirby Dance performed throughout the series. Which looks a little like this: <(^.^<)(^.^<) (^.^^) <(^.)> (^.^^) (>.^^)(>.^.)>

» [NES] *Kirby's Adventure* added mini-game distractions, which are a central part of the series.

» [GBA] The Game Boy Advance *Kirby* games are decent enough but do lack a certain amount of originality.

» [GBA] The GBA *Kirby* games were great for the handheld's younger audience, but that was about it.

KIRBY'S CANCELLED GAMES

It's not easy to make a Kirby game, or so it seems. There have been quite a few that were announced but never made it to the shelves...

Kirby's Air Ride 64

Originally announced as *Kirby Bowl 64*, this would have been a sort of sequel to *Dream Course* and involved rolling a spherical Kirby around a 3D environment. It later expanded to include airboard gliding sections and was renamed *Kirby's Air Ride*. Though it features some similarities to the *Kirby Air Ride* eventually released on GameCube it's actually a significantly different game.

Kirby Tilt 'n' Tumble 2

A 3D sequel to the Game Boy Color game, this would have been a GameCube game controlled by a special GBA cart, connected to a GBA and plugged into the GameCube. With so much specialist hardware required, it's easy to see why the project would have been abandoned. It would work pretty well on the Wii U GamePad, however, so maybe the idea will be revived one day.

Kid Kirby

In development at DMA Design, the studio behind *Lemmings* and *Unirally*, *Kid Kirby* was to star an infant version of Kirby in a platform-puzzle game to be controlled using the SNES mouse. But when the mouse proved unpopular, DMA tested standard joypad controls, found them unsuitable and ceased production of the game. All that remains are a few debug screens provided by programmer Mike Dailly.

Kirby GameCube 1

GameCube Kirby went through three different incarnations before it was eventually scrapped and revived as *Kirby's Return To Dream Land* on Wii. The first unreleased GameCube game was a platformer that featured three helper characters who could team up with Kirby by all stacking on top of him like a totem pole. Like *Return To Dream Land*, it would allow four people to play at once.

Kirby GameCube 2

The second iteration of the GameCube game would have featured a full 3D levels, viewed from a sort of isometric perspective and, in a bold change for the series, especially challenging gameplay. While this probably would have been one for the fans, we'll never know. Nintendo has only released one screenshot of the game, saying that it never reached the quality required for release.

Kirby GameCube 3

The third and final GameCube *Kirby* game would have been a traditional 2D platform game, complete with copy abilities, except it would have featured extremely high-resolution 2D visuals, good enough to match the anime that was airing at the time, *Kirby, Right Back At Ya!*, known as *Kirby Of The Stars* in Japan. Again, only one screen was ever released and nothing else is known.

» [SNES] *Kirby's Dream Course* is a perfect example of a *Kirby* spin-off worth playing.

» [Nintendo DS] The DS was instrumental in bringing new ideas to *Kirby*, as *Mass Attack* demonstrated.

Epic Yarn was Kirby on a full-on charm offensive. One of the easiest games of its type, but stunning

title suggested, an iterative continuation of the series that lacked the true innovation of *Super Star*, and is one of the reasons the *Kirby* series has a negative reputation for repetition and over-familiarity – the other reason being an especially high number of remakes.

Following *Dream Land 3*, the *Kirby* series fell into a bit of a slump. While some of the spin-off games were genuinely excellent, the main series became plagued by cancellations and mediocre releases. Next up was *Kirby 64: The Crystal Shards*, a particularly disappointing sequel in the context of its time. While *Mario* and *Zelda* transitioned into the 3D era with world-class productions that defined the way games would be designed for the next decade on, *Kirby* stuck to the same tired template. The short length and easy gameplay, meanwhile, sat uneasily with fans who were expected to pay premium prices for costly N64 cartridges. Out of context, *Kirby 64* is a fun and colourful *Kirby* adventure, but this was the point at which the series could have been reborn into something new. We had to wait until 2022 until we saw a 3D Kirby game that did him justice – more on that later.

Kirby's nadir continued in 2002 with the release of *Nightmare In Dreamland*, a Game Boy Advance remake of *Kirby's Adventure* that added new minigames and a multiplayer mode. Another short and easy game, as well as a retread, it did little to endear Kirby to the hardcore, although it did sell well with the GBA's massive audience of children. The next game on GBA was significantly better, however.

A co-development between HAL, Dimps and *Zelda: Oracles Of Ages/Seasons* developer Flagship, *Kirby & The Amazing Mirror* was an ambitious *Kirby* game that wrapped the familiar gameplay in a *Metroidvania* structure and threw in three AI Kirbys that could be summoned to help by using a magical mobile phone – as long as it had enough battery power left. An extremely long and deep *Kirby* game, *Amazing Mirror* suffered from a confusing map system and core gameplay that didn't quite evolve the series enough but it was certainly a step in the right direction after the previous few games. If you're an early adopter of 3DS, it's also sitting on your system right now, as it was one of 20 games in Nintendo's Ambassador Program, following the unexpected price drop in 2011.

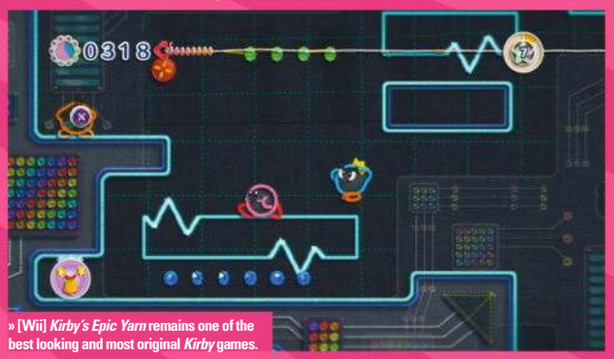
In 2005, Kirby finally got the burst of inspiration he deserved. Inspired by the touchscreen controls of the Nintendo DS, *Kirby: Power Paintbrush* was an entirely touch-controlled platform game in which Kirby appeared as a completely circular character and was manipulated indirectly, by drawing a limited rainbow path for him to follow on-screen. It was an early DS breakthrough that demonstrated how new technology could be used to bring innovation to classic franchises and sold the DS to gamers in ways that *Brain Training* and *Nintendogs* could only dream of.

So did Kirby enter a new age of constant reinvention? Sadly not. The next game, also co-produced with Flagship, was *Kirby: Mouse Attack*, a traditional Kirby game in the vein of *Amazing Mirror* that added only iterative features such as the ability to level up or combine copy abilities. It was a decent platformer but a disappointing one after the runaway inventiveness of *Power Paintbrush*. *Kirby Super Star Ultra* followed in 2008. A remake of the SNES game, it featured enhanced visuals and threw in several new minigames, but the series had become a little ho-hum again by this point and *Super Star Ultra* went mostly ignored.

» [Wii] This tree boss appeared in the first stage of *Kirby's Dream Land* and has been a staple part of the *Kirby* series ever since.

» [Nintendo DS] Even the lovable Kirby has a violent streak to him.

» [SNES] Kirby has lent himself to several genres over time.



» [Wii] *Kirby's Epic Yarn* remains one of the best looking and most original *Kirby* games.

As is now typical of Kirby, it wasn't long before he got out of his funk again, and in 2010 he bounced back with one of the best games in the series. Developed by the ex-Konami veterans at Good-Feel, *Kirby's Epic Yarn* reinvented our hero and his world as a game made entirely from wool and other fabrics. Not just an original art style, it allowed the aesthetic to inspire the gameplay and had you pulling back curtains in the levels, unravelling threads, popping buttons or even dipping beneath the fabric of a level's background to reveal secrets. *Epic Yarn* was Kirby on a full-on charm offensive. It was still one of the easiest games of its type but the stunning presentation and inviting world begged you to play and kept you interested in ways the previous games sometimes struggled to.

And if by now you thought the tradition was to follow up an innovative *Kirby* title with a dull one then Nintendo had a surprise in store. 2011's *Kirby Mass Attack* may have been the fourth *Kirby* title to appear on DS but it was far from tired. Incorporating elements of the RTS genre, it returned to stylus-based touchscreen controls and had you manipulating up to ten Kirbys at once in a puzzle-platformer hybrid that, perhaps for the first time in the series history, really got the balance right between fun and challenge.

Also that year was the last *Kirby* game so far. Titled *Return To Dream Land* in the US and *Kirby's Adventure Wii* in the UK, this was the first traditional *Kirby* game to appear on a home console since *Kirby 64* but was much less disappointing. A traditional side-scroller, it adds drop-in/drop-out four-player co-op, in which players can all be Kirby or pick from one of his costars King Dedede, Meta Knight or Waddle Dee. Each of these has their own special abilities while Kirby plays as normal, even able to suck up other players and spit them out as projectiles. Rightly overlooked next to the superior *Epic Yarn*, *Return To Dream Land* is a nevertheless entertaining game that sits proudly alongside Wii's other co-op platformers *New Super Mario Bros Wii* and *Donkey Kong Country Returns*.

To celebrate Kirby's 20th anniversary, Nintendo released a compilation, called *Kirby's Dream Collection*. Released in 2012, it featured six key games in the series: *Dream Land 1-3*, *Adventure*, *Super Star* and *Kirby 64* and was released on a single disc alongside some new stages that are based on *Return To Dream Land*. All the games are controllable using the Wii Remote (held horizontally of course) and it also features support for the Wii's Classic Controller. You can suspend play whenever you want and there's an excellent museum section that is full of interesting Kirby trivia and history. Additionally it includes a lovely outer sleeve and a music CD. Unfortunately, *Dream Collection* was only released in Japan and North America, meaning it's become something of a collector's item today.

Kirby's next adventure took place on the Nintendo 3DS

» [Nintendo 3DS] There's a wide range of suits to try out in *Planet Robobot* and many are brilliant fun.

in 2014 and it proved to be a fantastic return to form for the lovable pink blob. While it's a fairly conventional platformer for the most part, *Triple Deluxe* makes great use of the system's 3D to deliver some fantastic effects as Kirby seemingly jumps in and out of the screen. Motion controls are also used on some stages, while a brand-new ability called Hypernova greatly increases Kirby's inhale ability. Like previous *Kirby* games, *Triple Deluxe* also features some fun sub-games, *Kirby Fighters* and *Dedede's Drum Dash*. In fact, both titles proved popular enough to be released on Nintendo eShop as enhanced standalone releases.

If the first 3DS game turned out to be a good debut for Kirby, the same couldn't be said for Kirby's one and only Wii U release. *Kirby And The Rainbow Curse* made its debut in 2015 and is a sequel to the brilliant *Kirby: Power Paintbrush*. Immediately distinctive thanks to its excellent art style which depicts everything in the game as if it's made of clay, *Rainbow Curse* suffers from being a little too faithful to the DS game's mechanics. It's a lot easier to switch between the DS's screens than it is to swap between a TV and the Wii U's tablet screen, and as a result *Rainbow Curse* loses a lot of its charm trying to hold up the Wii U's hardware.

It's unclear what Hal Laboratory and Nintendo have in store for Kirby in the future, but it's clear that we've not seen the end of the lovable puffball

Fortunately, things picked up considerably for Kirby's second retail 3DS release, the rather excellent *Kirby: Planet Robobot*, which was released in 2016. As its name suggests, *Planet Robobot* allows Kirby to stomp around in giant mechanised suits, which in turn help to shake things up in the mechanics department. There are a large number of different suits to master and the game's levels ensure they're typically utilised in a number of clever ways. It also features more excellent-looking 3D effects and is arguably one of the nicer-looking games on the system. Kirby retains all his moves from the earlier *Triple Deluxe*,

» [Switch] Kirby features in *Super Smash Bros Ultimate*, along with every other character that's ever appeared in the series.

» [Switch] *Kirby And The Forgotten Land* is a triumphant 3D adventure for Nintendo's plucky pink puffball.

» [Switch] *Star Allies* has a focus on multiplayer, but it's not a deep game.

but he also has the ability to carry certain objects underwater and climb grates. Again, it's not the hardest game to master (*Kirby* games aren't known for their tough challenge) but it is a lot of fun to play.

As with *Kirby Triple Deluxe*, Nintendo expanded the two sub-games found in *Planet Robobot* and released them on the Nintendo eShop. The two games in question, *Blowout Blast* and *Team Kirby Clash Deluxe* are fun little diversions and are certainly worth investigating.

It's also worth pointing out that in addition to starring in his own games during this period, the lovable mascot was also making guest appearances in numerous other games, ensuring that he was always in the public eye. In addition to appearing in the snappily named *Super Smash Bros For Nintendo 3DS* and *Super Smash Bros For Wii U*, he also cropped up in *NES Remix*, which takes existing NES games and adds small micro-challenges to them. He also appeared prominently in the fun but shortly-lived *Nintendo Badge Arcade*, which enabled you to win badges from a grabber machine, many of which were based around some classic *Kirby* characters and enemies.

» [Wii U] *Rainbow Curse* looks absolutely sensational, but the mechanics don't match the glorious visuals.

» [Nintendo 3DS] Levels often take place on two planes in *Triple Deluxe*, creating a neat 3D effect.

2018 saw Nintendo releasing a *Kirby* game on the Switch in the form of *Kirby Star Allies*. As its name suggests, the big drawer in *Star Allies* revolves around turning your foes into friends. By throwing hearts at enemies it's possible to turn your enemies into allies, who will then help you to finish the stage. These allies are either controlled by the computer or by friends and it's possible to team up with three other players. Furthermore it's possible for Kirby to combine his abilities with allies to create all-new fusions. While it's something of a love letter to the earlier games in the series, *Star Allies* is tremendously short and easy, even for a *Kirby* game, and it failed to connect with fans.

A new *Smash Bros* game, *Super Smash Bros Ultimate*, arrived at the end of 2018. Featuring Kirby, as well as every other character that has ever appeared in the series, this party battler leaned into Nintendo's pink plucky hero in an unexpected way. In the game's story mode, it's Kirby who has to rescue and unite all of the heroes to battle the nefarious Galeem.

2022 saw a Kirby explosion as a new charismatic mainline game released on the Nintendo Switch. *Kirby And The Forgotten Land* celebrated Nintendo's rosy hero's 30th birthday in style, whisking him on a sprawling 3D adventure. Acting as Kirby's answer to *Super Mario Odyssey*, this latest adventure is packed full of creativity – and showed Nintendo's golden child who is the real power copier in the family. In *Retro Gamer 233*'s review, editor Darran Jones scored it a commendable 88%.

It's unclear what Hal Laboratory has in store for Kirby in the future, but it's obvious that we've not seen the end of the lovable puffball. His games might not always push the boat out in terms of innovation, but they always tend to be bright, colourful and fun, which probably explains why the little guy has been able to entertain us gamers for 30 years.

THE EVOLUTION OF DONKEY KONG COUNTRY

SO VISUALLY IMPRESSIVE THAT THOSE AT ITS LAUNCH THOUGHT IT WAS AN N64 TITLE, DONKEY KONG COUNTRY BREATHED LIFE BACK INTO THE AGEING SNES. FORMER AND CURRENT RARE AND RETRO STUDIOS DEVELOPERS REVIEW THE CLASSIC PLATFORMER AND THE SERIES IT INSPIRED

WORDS BY RORY MILNE

» [SNES] Like his Eighties coin-op predecessor, DK has a barrel attack in *Donkey Kong Country*.

» [SNES] There are all sorts of barrels in *Donkey Kong Country*, including some that act as cannons!

If there's a common thread that runs through Rare's early output, it's that it could work miracles on less than state-of-the-art hardware. *Knight Lore*, for example, ran on the humble ZX Spectrum, and then the *Wizards And Warriors* series and *Battletoads* redefined what was possible on the NES and Game Boy. But far from mere technical achievements, these titles were also object lessons in compelling platforming.

Donkey Kong Country continued this trend in the mid-Nineties, by coaxing the SNES into displaying 3D-rendered visuals created on advanced SGI workstations. At that point in time, nobody knew how to do this, but Rare artist Kevin Bayliss accepted the challenge. "I was focused on creating a 3D ape character that looked believable," Kevin ponders, "but it was a little bit daunting, because it just hadn't been done before, and I hadn't really got to grips with the Alias PowerAnimator software yet! Many test models were made to ensure we could create all of the moves that had been set by the designers. But I just wanted to make sure DK could beat his chest, slap the floor and perform the basics – but like a mountain gorilla. So I studied videos of apes intensely for a few weeks, and did my best to mimic some of the things I watched them do."

As well as real-life primates, Rare naturally looked to the Eighties coin-op that it had been tasked with updating to inform the mechanics of its SNES platformer. "We chose barrels as a nod back to the original *Donkey Kong* arcade game," Kevin acknowledges. "He obviously loved playing with them, and so it just made sense to keep this prop as a key element. We also wanted to have a constant throughout the game that was easily recognisable and worked well in a small compact space. Barrels stood out nicely on the backgrounds, and they had many uses – such as methods of transport and 'banana storage'. So it was just a great idea to use them."

Another great idea came from Donkey Kong's creator and owner, but it left the specifics to Kevin, who listened to Rare's designers but then went his own way. "I think we were asked to add a sidekick character by Nintendo, but rather than use Donkey Kong Jr it wanted a new kid on the block," Kevin explains. "There didn't seem much point in having a character that was similar in build to DK with the same moves and characteristics, and the design team wanted to add a much more agile character with a characteristic that would allow him or her to perform unique moves. The suggestion was to have a spider monkey – something with

» [SNES] Whereas DK is slow but strong in *Donkey Kong Country*, Diddy is fast and agile.

"I JUST WANTED TO MAKE SURE DK COULD BEAT HIS CHEST, SLAP THE FLOOR AND PERFORM THE BASICS – BUT LIKE A MOUNTAIN GORILLA"

KEVIN BAYLISS

» Kevin Bayliss created *Donkey Kong Country*'s concept art – he's online at www.twitch.tv/kev_bayliss

» The head programmer on *DKC* and *DKC 2*, Chris Sutherland also provided vocals for the two games.

» After play testing *DKL* and *DKC 2*, Paul Weaver worked as a designer on *Donkey Kong Country 3*.

» While at Retro Studios, Kynan Pearson was the senior designer on *Donkey Kong Country Returns*.

» *DKC Returns* art director Vince Joly went on to be the creative director of *DKC Tropical Freeze*.

STAGES OF EVOLUTION:
DONKEY KONG LAND

PAUL MACHACEK REVISITS THE HANDHELD DONKEY KONG COUNTRY SPIN-OFF

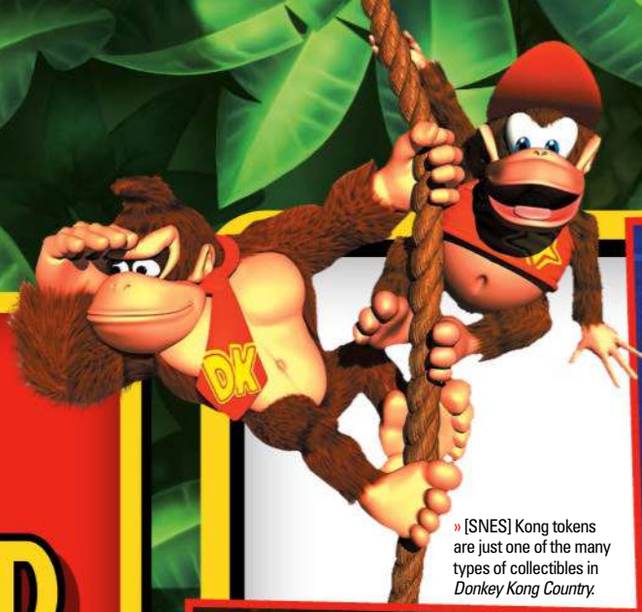
How did the Game Boy's screen affect *DKL*'s boss fights?
We had to make what happened more predictable. Having consistency of movement and regularity of actions allowed fast gameplay to be packed into a small and difficult to discern view, while also helping to manage the difficulty of the experience.

Why did *DKL* have a giant clam boss?
Admittedly clams don't attack in real life, but we improvised, and had this one spit out an unrealistic abundance of pearls! There was a consistent rhythm to the pearl spitting and clam movement so that you could become familiar with it and learn how to beat it.

How about *DKL*s flying pig, which occasionally doubled as a platform?
It was a nice asset that someone made, and we just randomly put it in to mix things up. There weren't too many places where we needed a moving 'pig platform', so I guess it was just a little detail and we moved on.

Why was *DKL*'s ostrich buddy able to dispatch foes, unlike in *DKC*?
Trying to avoid a suddenly appearing baddy with DK on an ostrich on a small screen would just have been too difficult. So it was to alleviate that, and give more options to progress without dying. It was also a nice addition to the character, given we had the freedom to move the franchise forward.

» Coder Paul Machacek adapted and expanded on aspects of *DKC* for the handheld spin-off *Donkey Kong Land*.



» [SNES] Kong tokens are just one of the many types of collectibles in *Donkey Kong Country*.

a long tail. I guess Diddy looked nothing like one of those, but he was certainly a monkey."

As well as DK and Diddy, Kevin was also tasked with producing concept art for 'animal buddies' for the pair to ride on, and so he set about sketching exotic creatures. "I was given a quick brief from Gregg Mayles," Kevin recalls. "He asked for 'scribbles' – the old term for concept art! – of characters that would behave in certain ways based on the environments that had been planned. So I scribbled down some ideas: a rhino, a tree frog and an ostrich. They were then taken by the artists on the *DKC* team, and they created Rambi, Winky and Expresso. It's amazing how well they turned out given the terrible scribbles I produced, but that was all that was needed to get the idea across."

Not content with giving *Donkey Kong Country* a cast of secondary characters, Rare decided to add sidequests based on collecting various items, such as coins, bananas and balloons. "We always tried to add additional layers, and to give players something else to aim for," Kevin points out. "We wanted a good variety of collectables, so some of the items would unlock or give special powers, or add additional points or kudos. Because we had rendering technology at our fingertips we could produce textures that looked like rubber and

» [SNES] *Donkey Kong Country*'s animal buddies help the Kongs to make progress through certain stages.

"I LIKED THE SPIDER, BECAUSE THERE WAS THE IDEA THAT YOU COULD CUSTOMISE YOUR ROUTE BY CHOOSING WHERE YOU WERE GOING TO PROGRESS TO"

CHRIS SUTHERLAND

gold, and we could also produce all kinds of special effects. So making a balloon that looked realistic and popped out from the environment was easy."

Thanks to its stunning rendered visuals, shifting copies of *Donkey Kong Country* was similarly simple – in fact, it set a record for being the fastest-selling videogame. Its sequel kept Diddy and swapped DK for Dixie, a ponytailed relative whose helicopter-like hovering made life easier as long as she was in play, as coder Chris Sutherland notes. "It was a cool feature that I'm glad was in there," Chris says. "But there was a lot of extra QA in order to make sure that every permutation was possible, because we didn't just have to do QA for the different ways you could be left in a level with one particular character when you were a *single* player, you also had multiplayer as well. I suppose it added a bit of strategy in terms of thinking which character should I play *here*? Because if you got hit, then it would be nigh on impossible to complete the next section."

Responsible for coding the play mechanics for *Donkey Kong Country 2: Diddy's Kong Quest*, but not implementing them, Chris often found himself trying to make the impossible requests of the designers on his team possible. "Often, the designers would come up with fiendish combinations of things that the coders hadn't thought of in the first place," Chris sighs. "Like the barrels. We had defined those individually, but then the designers would combine them in all sorts of weird and convoluted ways. Or in the rollercoaster stages you would have these fake-out sections, where you thought you were going to go *here*, but no, you went somewhere else!"

Given how popular the animal friends had been in *Donkey Kong Country*, its follow-up naturally revisited the concept, and one new buddy could spin their own platforms. "I liked the spider, because there was the idea that you could customise your route by choosing where you were going to progress to," Chris reflects. "You could also get to secret areas by going up high, and places that other characters couldn't get to. But there was a lot of balancing, because we wanted to make it so that it was still challenging. That was why there was a limit on the frequency that you could spit platforms out, and also the fact that they faded away after a while, meaning you had to jump before they dissolved."

If anyone had thought *Donkey Kong Country* might have been a novelty, then this idea was soon dispelled by its sequel's impressive sales. Rare soon rolled onto a third title, starring Dixie but not Diddy, and introducing toddler Kiddy,

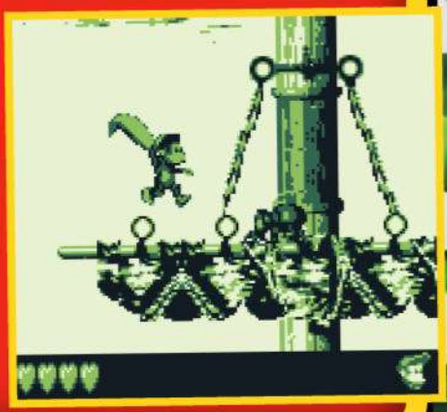
STAGES OF EVOLUTION: DONKEY KONG LAND 2

LEE SCHUNEMAN ON DONKEY KONG COUNTRY 2'S PORTABLE COUNTERPART

» The portable *DKC 2* variant *Donkey Kong Land 2* was Lee Schuneman's first design project at Rare.

What was your role on *Donkey Kong Land 2*?
It was my first game-design project. A software engineer called Rob Harrison had built this level editor on a Silicon Graphics machine, and an artist, Dean Smith, had taken the *Donkey Kong Country 2* graphics and turned them into greyscale versions. I was given the level creation tool, told to make levels that had the flavour of the SNES version and hurry the fuck up. But in a nice way!

How challenging were the levels to design?
My first attempt was like Mario, and Gregg Mayles was like, "No, no, no. That's not *Donkey Kong Country*." Because it was more about how you *flowed* through the levels. So once he nudged me in the right direction I started designing them more for that seamless flow, so that you could just quickly go through them.



How did things go after that?
I was working maybe not 24/7, but remember I had bugger all else to do – I was living in the middle of nowhere. I had a deadline to get all of the levels done, and six months later, it came out, and it sold a million copies. I remember being back in my hometown, and being able to tell a bunch of my old school buddies, "Hey! Look what I've done. I've made this game!"

STAGES OF EVOLUTION: DONKEY KONG LAND III

GARY RICHARDS DISCUSSES THE ON-THE-GO VARIANT OF DONKEY KONG COUNTRY 3

» Having helped out with *DKL 2*'s level designs, Gary Richards was asked to design *Donkey Kong Land 3*.

How did you approach the design of *Donkey Kong Land III*?

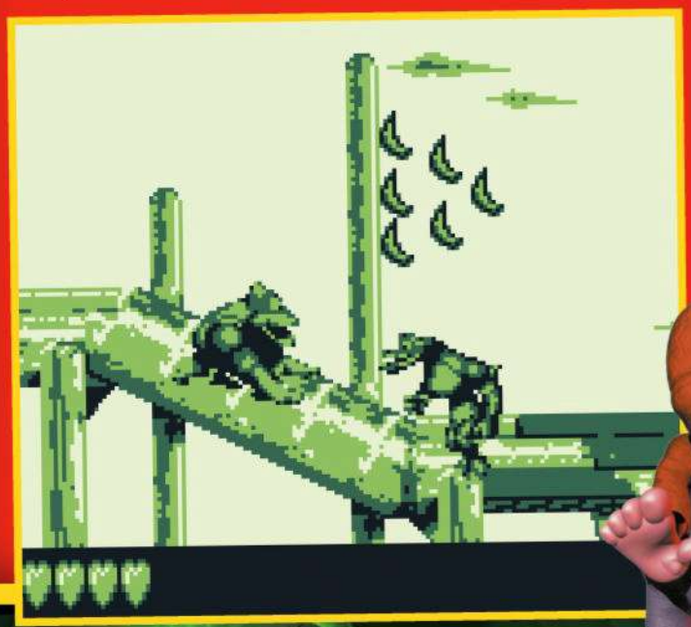
The same people were playing our games on the Game Boy and the SNES, so there was a management decision to give us free rein to come up with fresh takes on the ideas in *Donkey Kong Country 3*, which was my favourite in the trilogy. So it was just a case of working out how we could create an experience that people would find familiar but different.

How did its unique Ellie The Elephant level come about?

Since you weren't refilling its trunk all the time then we made it into a stage where you were going along taking out the enemies with a 'water gun'. It was nice to get a mix of different game styles in there. I'd never had the chance of doing a shoot-'em-up, but I could kind of sneak one in at that point.

What was designing the game's greyscale levels like?

It was a big compromise to make something on the Game Boy that you could see and play properly despite the screen. We moved on to the Virtual Boy after that, which was much worse! We knew it wasn't going to sell as soon as we saw it. We did look at getting *Donkey Kong Country* on to it at one point, but nothing ever came out.



» [SNES] Dixie Kong can use her ponytail much like a helicopter rotor in *Donkey Kong Country 2*.

» [SNES] The bramble-covered stages in *Donkey Kong Country 2* are renowned for their difficulty.

» [SNES] Animal buddy Squawks The Parrot is the protagonist of a *Donkey Kong Country 2* boss fight.

» [SNES] Although often annoying, *Donkey Kong Country 2*'s strong winds can blow you across wide gaps.

» [SNES] In a callback to *DKC*, Glimmer The Anglerfish lights the Kongs' way in *Donkey Kong Country 2*

who, thanks to designer Paul Weaver, could bounce across water. "We could obviously have gone with DK or Diddy," Paul concedes, "but we wanted to extend the family, and also be very thoughtful about what we could add to the gameplay. When we started scratching off mechanics in the previous two games it became a real challenge to keep things fresh and interesting. But we had a range of age going all the way up to Cranky Kong, so we thought we would go in the other direction. Then since Kiddy was a bouncing baby boy we took that literally!"

Besides its amusing new player character, *Donkey Kong Country 3: Dixie Kong's Double Trouble!* also toyed with other genres and 3D gameplay, although the latter was restricted to the follow-up's bonus levels. "The map screens added an overworld concept to things, so rather than just following a line we wanted to make it like a treasure map that you explored," Paul recollects. "That was about trying to infuse really light RPG elements into the game – I was a huge *Zelda* fan, and I think you end up embedding other games into your own game designs. With the 3D snowman and the snowball fight, and the circus game, well platformers were inherently 2D, but we were just on the cusp of 3D gaming. So *DKC 3* was still a 2D game, but starting to introduce depth into it was something we wanted to play with."

Of course, the third *Donkey Kong Country* title also had its own helpful jungle critters, most notably an elephant with a useful trunk and an inconvenient aversion to rodents. "We had multiple mechanics with the elephant," Paul grins. "We had the aspect of being able to suck objects towards you, and then throw them. Then you could suck up water and use that. The next iteration was where we had mice under spotlights, and the elephant was afraid of them and ran away. We had added that as a little bit of personality, but it then became a mechanic. So we combined all of the elements together, where you avoided the spotlights or knocked the mice off from a distance."

> "WE HAD A RANGE OF AGE GOING ALL THE WAY UP TO CRANKY KONG, SO WE THOUGHT WE WOULD GO IN THE OTHER DIRECTION"
>
> PAUL WEAVER

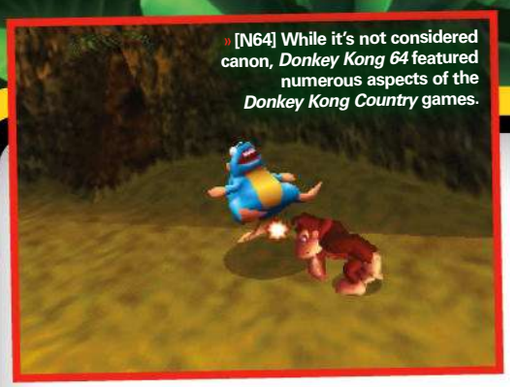
Yet more anthropomorphic characters followed, although non-player ones, in the form of shopkeeper bears who facilitated the introduction of trading and hiring to the series. "We had to come up with their quirks, and I only had four lines of dialogue for each one!" Paul exclaims. "But they added a nice touch. You know, you had the Donkey Kong coins and the silver coins, so there was almost coin fatigue creeping in. So beating a boss and getting a random object, and then remembering that a bear on an earlier level had been talking about it. That was useful for bringing the game's elements together, and it was a fulfilling subquest to round out the story as well."

Although not released until after the N64's Japanese launch, *Donkey Kong Country 3* still sold remarkably well and concluded the trilogy in style. That wasn't the end of Rare's *DK* adventures, however, as it went on to create two additional games that took the popular primate and the cast of characters from the *DKC* series into the third dimension.

» [SNES] Kiddy Kong can bounce over water in *Donkey Kong Country 3* to avoid opponents beneath the surface.

Diddy Kong Racing was a highly entertaining kart racer that let players race in karts, planes and hovercrafts. While its multiplayer wasn't quite as slick and polished as *Mario Kart 64*, it bettered that game from a single-player perspective thanks to its incredible 'Adventure' mode, which was not only brilliantly structured but featured entertaining boss battles where you had to out-race them.

Rare's final *DK* game on home consoles was *Donkey Kong 64*, which made its debut on the Nintendo 64 in 1999. Initially you simply played as DK, but as you explored the huge island that the game was set in you encountered additional members of his tribe, including Diddy Kong. Each new primate had distinct abilities that you needed to use extensively if you wanted to defeat King K Rool and his Kremling minions. Chunky Kong could lift rocks, Tiny Kong had the ability to shrink and enter tiny holes, Diddy Kong could fly thanks to a handy jetpack and Lanky Kong could float. While critically acclaimed



» [N64] While it's not considered canon, *Donkey Kong 64* featured numerous aspects of the *Donkey Kong Country* games.

> "THE CLINGING SYSTEM WAS A BIG ADDITION. IT WAS ONE OF THE THINGS WE WANTED TO DO TO EXPAND MOVEMENT FROM JUST THE GROUND PLANE"
> KYNAN PEARSON

at the time, it drew some criticism for being quite the collect-a-thon, and for its overall length and occasionally wonky camera angles. That didn't put off gamers, however, and it proved to be another big seller for Rare, shifting over 2.4 million sales by 2004.

Despite these successes, however, the *Donkey Kong Country* series proper didn't continue until 2010, with Retro Studios rather than Rare at the helm. *Donkey Kong Country Returns* for the Wii reinstated DK and Diddy as the player characters, although you couldn't swap between them, as the game's senior designer Kynan Pearson notes. "We knew that the DK/Diddy switch was an important feature in Rare's original, but we wanted to take a 'combined character' route," Kynan considers. "When we had made that decision we were working closely with Risa-san and Tanabe-san at Nintendo Software Planning & Development – SPD. Basically, changing the health system and going with combining the two characters was a new system. But it also worked with the hit points, and allowed for an escalation of power, where DK and Diddy could do a prolonged, infinite roll when they were together."

Solo players could also make use of Diddy's jetpack to pull off double-jumps – as whenever he was in-play in single-player mode he would cling to DK's back, and a second player playing the monkey had access to his peanut popgun. "We had seen everything that had been done with Diddy in every game series, and there were a few things that we felt like adding – like the jetpack and the popgun," Kynan reviews. "There were obviously benefits with the stalled descent you got from the jetpack, and then the popgun was there to give a second player something fun to do that would also be of benefit. There was also an aspect of wanting to allow a second player with no experience of the game to hop on DK's back and not worry about the difficult platforming."

Adding to the challenge of the platforming in the latest *DKC* title was a new and ingenious mechanic, which allowed DK and Diddy to climb vertical and overhead areas by grabbing handfuls of the grass growing on them, and then pulling themselves upwards or across. "The clinging system was a big addition," Kynan remembers. "It was one of the things we wanted to do to expand movement from just the ground plane, because it gave opportunities for wall and ceiling gameplay. I remember it was one of those things that we documented heavily and expanded on, just to build the screen with interaction no matter which direction you were headed. We wanted to give just as much to do on the top-half of the screen, with ceiling gameplay and where you were on walls, and clinging afforded that."

Another of the game's mechanisms stemmed from technical considerations rather than gameplay related ones, in that rather than stopping the Kongs at the screen edges if they strayed too far apart in two-player mode, they instead got teleported back to their partner. "If we had stopped the camera movement, we would have created significantly more frustration in terms of making precision jumps that required momentum, and on some levels that supported faster play," Kynan assesses. "Players could have also prevented forward momentum and movement by just hanging back, and that would have created opportunities where you were fighting with your partner rather than working together."

One further differentiation between *Returns* and the original *Donkey Kong Country* came in the form of levels played at dusk, where everything was depicted in silhouette form. "It was really about working with silhouettes in terms of clarity of experience by separating foreground and background," Kynan explains. "The idea was that we could use parallax as a way to allow you to immediately differentiate things that were going to flow past from things you could interact with. This created a striking visual quality, and we could sometimes use that for puzzles. So for instance, we had statues that would line-up to become the silhouette of a banana on a pillar, where all of the layers of parallax came together."

Released to glowing reviews, first on the Wii then the 3DS three years later, the positive response to *Donkey Kong Country Returns* led to a sequel – subtitled *Tropical Freeze*. Its creative director Vince Joly recalls a desire to make its icy foes relatable. "Here was the high-level thinking behind the Snowmads," Vince begins. "After using the more abstract design of the Tikis in *Donkey Kong Country*

» [Wii] Although near-dark, the silhouette stages in *Donkey Kong Country Returns* present clear objectives.

» [Wii] Unlike *DKC*, DK has the ability to cling to grassy surfaces in *Donkey Kong Country Returns*.

» [Wii] DK can team up with Diddy and use his jetpack to double jump in *Donkey Kong Country Returns*.

» [Wii] Like earlier Kong titles, Diddy's weapon of choice in *Donkey Kong Country Returns* is a peanut popgun.

STAGES OF EVOLUTION: COMPOSING DONKEY KONG COUNTRY

DAVID WISE ON CREATING SOUNDTRACKS FOR THE SERIES

» The musician on *DKC* and *DKC 2*, David Wise also composed the soundtrack for *DKC Tropical Freeze*.

Why did the *Donkey Kong Country* soundtracks tend to alternate between upbeat and atmospheric?

The music was driven by what we wanted the player to do, and if we wanted to panic them! So there was always a lot of 'psycho-acoustic' stuff going in, and that was why we chose *Stickerbush Symphony* for Bramble Blast. Because it was a really hard level, and having the juxtaposition of *smooth* music created a different feeling than ifwe had put really *hard* music in.

What sort of direction did Tim Stamper give you on the *Donkey Kong Country* games?

It was never Tim standing over your shoulder. He would take you away and explain exactly what he wanted, and you would come back with something that might work. Invariably there could then be several iterations of that. The first thing you brought him might not work, so you would go away until you found something that did.

How did the Kongs 'singing' at the start of *DKC* come about?

We used a vocal pad, and we got Mark Betteridge, who was head of coding – because he was great at monkey sounds! We could only have a small selection of those, but I wanted the Kongs to sing, so I took his sample and just *pitched* it, and played around with it. That was how we got the Kongs singing at the beginning.

STAGES OF EVOLUTION:
COMPARING THE KONGS

HOW DONKEY KONG'S SPECIAL ABILITIES COMPARE TO HIS PRIMATE PARTNERS'

DONKEY KONG

In the SNES original, DK can dispatch foes by jumping on them, rolling into them, throwing barrels at them and slapping the ground in front of them. In *DKC Returns*, he can also climb grass-covered walls and ceilings, and in *Tropical Freeze* he can pull handles to activate mechanics.

DIDDY KONG

Like DK, Diddy can throw barrels at opponents or jump on them in *Donkey Kong Country* – although he can jump higher and is faster, and he has a cartwheel attack. His abilities are identical in *DKC 2*, but in *DKC Returns* and *Tropical Freeze* he has a peanut popgun and a barrel jetpack.

DIXIE KONG

In *DKC 2* and *DKC 3*, Dixie's most useful talent is her ability to spin her ponytail-like helicopter blades while jumping, which allows her to travel safely over great distances. In *Tropical Freeze*, she has a bubblegum gun, and can use her ponytail as a propeller when she's under water.

KIDDY KONG

Dixie's co-star in *DKC 3*, Kiddy's weighty build makes him ideal for her to throw him through cracked ceilings into hidden areas! He can also smash down doors by rolling into them, and he can bounce along stretches of water by combining a roll with a jump just as he hits the surface.

CRANKY KONG

First playable in the *DKC* series in *Tropical Freeze*, the original Donkey Kong uses his cane as a pogo stick, which allows him to jump much higher than the other Kongs in the game and take out foes that they can't tackle. He can also stun opponents by firing sets of dentures at them!

» [Wii U] *Tropical Freeze*'s Snowmad opponents are Scandinavian or arctic in origin, with a little artistic licence.

» [Wii U] Cranky Kong can pull off huge jumps in *Tropical Freeze* by using his cane as a pogo stick.

Returns, we felt that there was more that we could do to have the player relate to the Kongs' foes. We wanted a set of baddies that would thematically and physically match up well against DK as a large primate. So polar bears, sea lions and walruses all seemed like good mammalian match-ups – and that was the beginning of the story of these nomadic snow creatures invading DK's island."

In addition to its wintery opponents, *Tropical Freeze* was also given not one but three secondary player characters: Diddy, Dixie and for the first time Cranky Kong. "It was decided among leadership that we should expand on DK's universe, and that by re-introducing these nostalgic characters with new gameplay mechanics we could keep the *DKC* franchise fresh and exciting," Vince enthuses. "I believe the idea for Cranky's abilities came from brainstorming meetings that the designers had, where they thought about how they could use his cane in interesting ways to give him a new ability. A 'pogo stick' like action seemed to be a good fit, as it provided the player with a choice of which Kong they should use when, for example, faced with sections of spiked pits."

Tropical Freeze's titular hero DK also gained fun new abilities, which included picking up

» [Wii U] DK can use fallen foes as a ranged weapon in *Tropical Freeze*, like Kiddy in *DKC 3*.

» [Wii U] In *Tropical Freeze*, DK can trigger interactive features by pulling handles out of the ground.

stunned foes and using them as projectiles – much like Kiddy had been able to do in *Donkey Kong Country 3*. "The more we could do to make the baddies feel like tangible, living creatures the better, and being able to pick them up and throw them helped that feeling," Vince reasons. "Adding this mechanic immediately opened the door for more charming characters, along with the new and interesting gameplay opportunities of timing throws at targets. Because this action was designed to be done while in motion as well as while DK was stationary it really helped to maintain the flow of the player's progression."

Another of DK's freshly acquired talents involved pulling handles out of the ground and other flat surfaces, which would reveal pick-ups or aid his progress in less obvious ways such as producing platforms, uncovering paths or draining tanks of fruit juice. "It allowed for a further sense of exploration by seeking out these small triggers," Vince observes. "It also gave the player a new mechanic to learn that mixed in with the Kongs' other abilities. The less obvious implementations added some nice variety to the player's progression, but the satisfaction of this cause and effect had its limits. The Kongs' other actions like the Ground Pound and Barrel Cannon just tended to feel like more satisfying ways to unlock new platforms or areas."

> "WE WANTED A SET OF BADDIES THAT WOULD THEMATICALLY AND PHYSICALLY MATCH UP WELL AGAINST DK AS A LARGE PRIMATE"
> VINCE JOLY

One area where *Tropical Freeze* mirrored its predecessor rather than differentiating itself was with its choice of animal buddies, although other options were explored. "We were thinking that bringing back the familiarity that players experienced in *Donkey Kong Country Returns* would be a good way for us to further strengthen their love for these characters," Vince contemplates. "We felt this was the right choice over adding different buddies in their stead, and we believed the introduction of the other Kongs filled the need for expanding the character line-up and adding new player mechanics. However, we would have *loved* to have introduced some new animal buddies. Like Enguarde, for instance, who did come close to being added."

After reviewing well when it came out for the Wii U in 2014, an enhanced version of *Donkey Kong Country Tropical Freeze* arrived on the Switch in 2018, and this brought the series to a close – at least at the time of writing. On the 1994 SNES original that started the series off, Kevin Bayliss praises what was achieved on limited hardware, and the great feeling that you still get from playing the game. "It astounds me that it ended up looking so good with just a small amount of colours and fairly low resolution," Kevin beams. "I think it's still a great game to play, because it's packed with humour, and it's just so charming and atmospheric. It's something I'm really proud to have been involved in, and I can't believe that I was one of the people who got the whole thing moving with the original models I created. When I look back at it now, it's bananas!"

RAYMAN

Darran Jones catches up with the talented Michel Ancel and uncovers the origins of his popular limbless hero

IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** UBISOFT
- **DEVELOPER:** LUDI MEDIA
- **RELEASED:** 1995
- **GENRE:** PLATFORMER

Although he's taken more of a backseat in recent years despite some great showings in *Origins* and *Legends*, only a fool would bet against the enduring popularity of Michel Ancel's *Rayman*. First appearing on the PlayStation right at the beginning of the machine's life, the series went on to become a massive success for Ubisoft, with conversions of the original game appearing on everything from the PC to the Game Boy Advance. It might not deliver many new mechanics, but the uniqueness of its hero, its gorgeous-looking visuals and the cleverly designed stages all combined to make *Rayman* one of the PlayStation's most popular games, and it went on to spawn two 3D sequels and numerous other popular spin-offs, including the popular *Rabbids* franchise.

"I first drew Rayman when I was just a teenager," recalls Michel Ancel when we asked him about the quirky character's early origins. "At the time I was simply trying to teach myself to draw, make music and write code in order to realise my dream of making videogames."

Michel later returned to those early sketches in 1992, when he began work on *Rayman*. He'd fulfilled his dream of working in the videogames industry at the young age of 17, when he created a demo for the French software developer Lankhor. Michel soon met up with developer Nicolas Choukroun in Montpellier and began creating the visuals for some of his games, including *Pick 'N Pile* and *The Intruder*. The talented Michel soon procured himself a bigger project in the form of *Brain Blaster*, which was eventually published by Ubisoft in 1990, paving the way for his cherished *Rayman* project.

Rayman's distinct stylings came from a number of different sources, with Michel citing Celtic, Chinese and Russian fairytales as a major source of inspiration for the unique, vibrant world and the unique characters that inhabit it. By far the most interesting aspect of *Rayman*, though, is the fact that when the press and public were fully embracing 3D, the game's stunning 2D visuals made it stand out from the crowd. The end result was that rather than feeling like last-gen technology – both the Mega Drive and SNES's popularity was slowly starting to fade – *Rayman* felt fresh, exciting and new.

"As a child, I spent a lot of time close to the rivers, chasing strange insects, climbing on big trees," begins Michel when asked about the distinctive look of *Rayman*'s world. "When you're a child, everything seems huge and extraordinary. When I started working on a *Rayman* game, it all started with trees and strange creatures."

“Michel saw the new machines as a prime opportunity to get the best out of his new project”

Ironically, *Rayman*’s distinctive 2D look when its contemporaries like *Croc: Legend Of The Gobbos* and *Crash Bandicoot* were wowing the world in 3D was due to an extremely protracted development time, which saw *Rayman* shift over a number of different potential computers and consoles, before finally making its debut on Sony’s PlayStation.

Rayman’s origins are reported to have started on the Super Nintendo, and while there’s some truth in that, its actual birth was on a 16-bit computer, not console.

“To tell you the truth, I actually started working alone on *Rayman* using an Atari ST,” begins Michel. “I was doing the sound, the art, the programming and the animation. Then with Frédéric Houde, a programming friend, we decided to make a Super Nintendo CD version, but the hardware was never released! So we decided to move on to different hardware. By this time there was a big console war brewing between the likes of NEC, Nintendo, Sega, Atari, 3DO and others.”

Michel saw the interest in the upcoming machines as a prime opportunity to get the best out of his new project. The hardware offerings gave him plenty of options, especially as he realised that interest in the Atari ST was beginning to wane and that a standalone Super Nintendo might struggle with the huge amounts of information that he wanted to put into the game.

After a great deal of thought, Michel eventually decided that the Atari Jaguar would become the final home for his new creation, although this later changed to the PlayStation. In hindsight, it seems like utter madness to launch a new IP on such an unproven system, but there was reasoning behind Michel’s decision. Atari’s console had amazing raw power that the other systems he had been tinkering with just didn’t possess. “When the Atari Jaguar was released, I felt it was the first console that was capable of displaying our graphics,” he says.

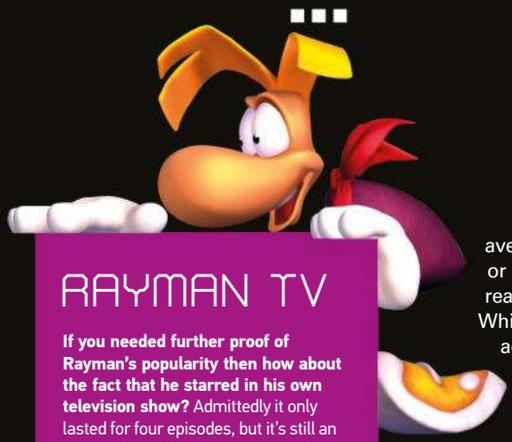
It proved to be a wise decision, at least from a technical point of view, with *Rayman* receiving high praise at the time for its stunning visuals. “The graphics and sounds have been beautifully engineered with some great themed levels, full of soothing colour and animation,” explains Michel. “All the graphics have been done using 65,000 colours and look excellent, the scrolling is of the smoothest quality, and the control system feels exactly right and needs very little to get used to.” That was the praise from popular Atari website *The Atari Times*, which awarded *Rayman* an impressive 92%, with reviewer Andy Robertson even cheekily saying that: “He’s the star of what is that rarest of things, a GOOD Jag game. Yes, you heard me right: *Rayman* on the Jaguar is GOOD – not

» [PlayStation] Michel on *Rayman*’s rumoured two-player mode: “It was a prototype I did, but it was never included in the final game.”

OUT ON A LIMB?

One of the most distinctive features of Rayman is that he’s completely limbless. While he does have big-gloved hands and oversized feet, they’re not actually attached to anything, which looks more than a little weird the first time you lay eyes on him. It nevertheless makes him far more memorable than many of the other platforming heroes of the late Nineties though, and we were keen to know from Michel whether the distinctive look was a clever way of ensuring that his character left a lasting impression on the player. The actual answer is a little more mundane.

“When I was trying to get a handle on animation, I realised just how hard it is to move arms and legs convincingly,” he explains. “Since my imagination is always getting ahead of my ability to realise many of my ideas, I had to stick with what I could humbly get away with. This is still the case today. The big difference is today I’ve got fantastic artists and engineers to make up for my shortcomings. As for Rayman, he was doomed to go limbless once the concept took off on its own! And sometimes accidents like that make for the happiest results. After all, he wouldn’t have a wicked extendable punch and a ‘hairlycopter’, among other skills, if he had limbs like any other hero.”



RAYMAN TV

If you needed further proof of Rayman's popularity then how about the fact that he starred in his own television show? Admittedly it only lasted for four episodes, but it's still an impressive achievement, especially when you consider that it's only the likes of Sonic, Mario, Pac-Man and Donkey Kong who normally manage to get their own cartoon gigs.

Rayman: The Animated Series was released in 1999 and was aired in a number of countries, including France, Canada and the United Kingdom. The four completed episodes were 'LacMac Napping', 'No Parking', 'High Anxiety' and 'Big Date', but the other nine episodes were cancelled due to a lack of funds. Considering the general poor quality of the actual show – copies exist on VHS and DVD, and episodes are on YouTube if you're feeling particularly curious – this wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

average or weak or pathetic or even second rate but really, really GOOD."

While *Rayman* received acclaim on the Jaguar, it's the PlayStation version that most people will have played, which is hardly surprising, as it was a phenomenal success on Sony's console and something that Michel still can't fathom.

"Honestly, I just can't explain," he began when we asked him why the PlayStation version proved so immensely popular. "It was the time of the first 3D games, like *Toshinden* and *Ridge Racer*, and *Rayman* was still 2D. Maybe the rule is that players don't care about technical details; they just follow the fun and that's all."

"Maybe the rule is that players don't really care about technical details – they just follow the fun"

If it was fun that gamers were after then they found it in *Rayman*, and it just kept selling. Sales for the game hit over 4 million units, making it the 16th bestselling game of all time on the PlayStation. What's impressive, especially when you consider that above it were heavy hitters such as *Resident Evil 2*, *Tomb Raider*, *Final Fantasy VII* and *Gran Turismo*. Even more impressive is that it's the only 2D game in the top 20.

Although the Jaguar had originally impressed Michel with its high storage capacity cartridges, it wasn't long before his focus finally switched over to Sony's machine. "Sony's PlayStation was not only far more powerful than the Atari Jaguar, and easier to program, but it also had CD capability, which was perfect for storing our giant textures."

While constantly switching machines allowed Michel to ensure that his finished game would look as good as it possibly could, it also meant that development took a little longer than originally intended. "It took us around two years with the final team to complete," he confirms about *Rayman*'s development time. "[In terms of challenges], the constant change of hardware, from one console to another, was by far the biggest technical issue [we faced]."

When *Rayman* was finally released in 1995, it proved a huge success for Ubisoft, and while it was fairly conventional for a 2D platformer, it nevertheless featured plenty of character. The biggest was, of course, Rayman himself, who, unlike many other one-off heroes of the mid-Nineties, went on to have a significant shelf life. Utterly unique thanks to his limbless body, oversized gloves and irrepressible grin, Michel reveals that he nailed Rayman's unique look on his very first attempt.

"Rayman is a one-shot creation," he confirms. "As soon as I started to animate him and show him, people began to get excited. It was the same for the Rabbids: you draw something, bring it to life, and it's fun right off the block. People react spontaneously and enjoy it with no important modifications." He was also quick to clarify that the unusual look of his hero wasn't a conscious decision to make him stand apart from the other platforming characters that were doing the rounds at the time. "It's just a creative process driven by what pops out of your brain and what amuses you," he continues. "Again, when I imagined Rayman

» [Jaguar] The Jaguar version featured a number of notable differences to its CD-ROM cousins, with certain levels and bosses being completely absent.

» [DSi] *Rayman* has been converted to a huge number of systems, including the PC, Saturn, DS and GBA.

» [PlayStation] There are a number of bosses to battle in *Rayman*, and they're all distinctive to look at.

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

TONIC TROUBLE
SYSTEMS: NINTENDO 64, PC, GAME BOY COLOR
YEAR: 1999

BEYOND GOOD & EVIL
SYSTEMS: PS2, PC, GAMECUBE, XBOX
YEAR: 2003

RAYMAN ORIGINS (PICTURED)
SYSTEMS: VARIOUS
YEAR: 2011

for the very first time, I was just a kid who had no idea that someday he would be standing on shelves next to the likes of Mario and Sonic."

And yet Rayman did go on to become a household name, and while it might not have set any new gameplay benchmarks, it did deliver a highly enjoyable – if rather frustrating at times – experience to anyone who played it.

The core quest of *Rayman* involved the limbless hero rescuing Electoons from their prison cages and eventually facing off against the villainous Mr Dark. Spread across six distinct levels, with delightful names such as Dream Forest and Blue Mountains, the locations are split into further sub-levels, which contain the well-hidden Electoons. Only when you've rescued every single one will you be able to finally confront the elusive Mr Dark.

Fortunately, Rayman slowly gains a number of skills from Betilla the fairy that range from the ability to punch enemies with his telescopic fists to using his hair as helicopter blades to cross otherwise impassable chasms. These powers are essential to Rayman, as they allow him to revisit previous levels, *Metroid*-style, in order to save every last Electoon.

It's all very old school, but it's executed in a charming way and is only really let down by the insane difficulty spikes that sometimes crop up. And yet for all its occasional difficulty, *Rayman* was a game that you'd continually want to return to, because it was just so damned unusual. After all, name us another game where its lead character would stop for a quick photo, skate down a mountainside on a frying pan, or high-five a weeping boss and then give him a big hug after he bested it.

Even beyond the commercial success on the PlayStation, *Rayman* has gone on to become a key pillar in Ubisoft history, thanks to a large number of conversions, a handful of sequels, and plenty of spin-offs, from *Rayman Golf* to *Rayman Brain Games*. The series returned to its 2D roots, with the arrival of *Rayman Origins*, which Michel is describes as "an immersive and fun-to-play platformer" which was followed up soon after by *Rayman Legends*.

"Rayman is the guy who helped get me to a place I feel lucky to be: making games and having fun doing it!"

» [Xbox 360] *Rayman Origins* is a gorgeous return to side-scrolling form for Ubisoft's platforming hero.

CR
BAND

Nintendo had Mario, Sega had Sonic, Namco had Pac-Man. As the dawn of the PlayStation era began to rise it was clear Sony needed its own mascot, and it found one in the unlikeliest of marsupials

» Crash bares a striking resemblance to *Looney Tunes*' Tasmanian Devil.

ASH BANDICOOT

If you stop and think about it, the original PlayStation era established an impressive amount of icons. Lara Croft, Cloud Strife and even the colourful beanie of PaRappa will likely come to mind when you consider the marketing pieces of the time. But among the new faces of this exciting, upstart of a console none was so prevalent as *Crash Bandicoot*, an immediately eye-catching character whose frantic behaviour and Nineties cool charm was practically imprinted on his skin.

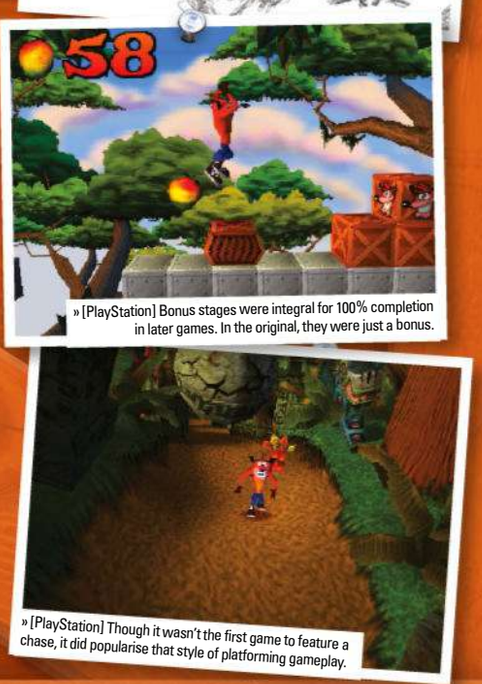
All the other characters needed context to stand out, while Crash landed in the 32-bit generation perfectly. In many ways he was decrepit, of a 16-bit age where bipedal animals with extraordinary abilities was the norm. The PlayStation had already been moving the industry far beyond that, and here was Crash: yet another platforming creature that should have been left to fail like so many before him. But Crash perfectly epitomised everything unique about the PlayStation at the time; he had attitude, he was unique, and his game helped bring the platforming genre kicking and screaming into the 3D generation. Crash was to cutesy platformer mascots what the PlayStation was to the videogames industry: a middle finger to the status quo.

Today, most know the creative minds behind the original *Crash Bandicoot*, Naughty Dog might be a powerhouse developer these days, but prior to its seminal PlayStation game it was far from the highs of *Uncharted* and *The Last Of Us*. In fact, its output before *Crash Bandicoot* was insignificant at best, and awful at worst. The developer was just two people at the time, close friends Jason Rubin and Andy Gavin. While the pair had worked on projects before, it was their 3DO title *Way Of The Warrior* that set Naughty Dog on the path towards greatness. "I'm sorry, those guys were lucky as shit," asserts David Siller, one of the key producers of *Crash Bandicoot*. "They had done some real so-so products – *Keef The Thief* and other stuff that they had done, some of it published at EA. They'd invested in their own 3DO development system, and those two guys developed a game on the 3DO. We used to call it *White Trash Warriors*, but it was a fighting game like *Mortal Kombat* called *Way Of The Warrior*." David goes on to explain that 3DO had a booth at CES one year and, by chance, Naughty Dog would be placed right next to Universal Interactive Studios, which was there showing off its first videogame, *Jurassic Park Interactive*.

"Apparently, in the course of the three or four days [Jason Rubin and Andy Gavin got to know] Mark Cerny and Rob Biniaz who were running Universal Interactive and needed developers, so they struck a deal with these guys. They said, 'Look, we'll move the two of you lock, stock and barrel to Los Angeles and we'll give you offices at Universal.'" And with that, Naughty Dog ▶

» [PlayStation] The opening stage of *Crash* might not be the toughest, but it certainly is memorable.

» [PlayStation] Bonus stages were integral for 100% completion in later games. In the original, they were just a bonus.


» [PlayStation] Though it wasn't the first game to feature a chase, it did popularise that style of platforming gameplay.

MEET THE CAST

CRASH BANDICOOT

■ The titular hero, once an ordinary bandicoot before an experiment by Dr Neo Cortex gave him exceptional abilities and a lust for crate destruction. Originally, he was named Willie The Wombat.

AKU AKU

■ A mysterious floating tribal mask and a penchant for the force of good. As a companion to Crash, he keeps him safe from danger and can even empower the bandicoot with invulnerability.

DR NEO CORTEX

■ This big-headed (literally) evil scientist is the central antagonist for Crash's adventures, often building nefarious contraptions as part of his experiments to create an army of mutant animal warriors.

N. BRIO

■ The original assistant to Dr Neo Cortex and a returning character throughout the series. N. Brio's crazed and insane remarks are a good suggestion of his mental state (note the loose screws in his head).

RIPPER ROO

■ The second boss encounter in the original *Crash Bandicoot*, and one of the more recognisable, too. The straightjacket highlights just how crazy he is, a side-effect of prolonged exposure to Cortex's Evolvo Ray.

» [PlayStation] There were many *Mario Kart* clones at the time, but *CTR* stood out as a challenger to Nintendo's throne.

» [PlayStation] There were a number of new features added into *Crash Bandicoot 2*

▶ was locked in: it was to produce a 3D platformer with the backing from Universal as part of a three-game deal.

With the deal in place, it was time for Naughty Dog to get to work. New hires were brought in to bulk out the team and get the project underway. David – who had been working at Sunsoft – was brought into Universal Interactive where he was to be a producer, overlooking the development of key titles. Immediately, David was put to work with Naughty Dog, on a title that was then known as *Willie The Wombat*. "I was told that I would be the producer of those guys," recalls David. "There was a six-page story that had been typed up in a nice font, I think by Jason Rubin. And it told the story of Willie The Wombat, and it talked about how the game was going to play. It would be third-person, camera-behind-the-character, and there would also be some side view and it would transition from one to the other."

With Andy Gavin working hard on the technology of the game, Jason Rubin – alongside David Siller – began creating the characters, the setting and the story for *Willie The Wombat*. We're told of different milestones the team was given, the initial being where the technology side of the software is proven to be up and running. "But the next objective is 'first-playable'," David states, "and what that really was as far as the contract meant was that they needed to have Willie The Wombat running around in some kind of environment." This particular milestone is common in game development, and gives the publisher an early sign of the project's progress and potential. David claims that the team at Naughty Dog failed this all-important test. "Mark Cerny came to me, and he said, 'Look, I want you to now design levels, and you come in and show them how the game needs to play.' So I did that," David asserts. "I designed the levels that ended up being at the end of the game."

Once the game was up to scratch and with Universal's milestone met, David Siller, Mark Cerny and Rob Biniaz – founding president of UIS – went to show the game to Sony, a meeting that proved to be a huge success. "We took the prototype to get concept approval and Bernie Stolar saw it. The man is brilliant, he saw it right away – called people into the conference room to get them to look at it, and he had his assistant go and get paperwork that he would sign immediately." *Willie The Wombat*, it would seem, was set to be an early PlayStation title. Except, by that point, this acrobatic mammal had already encountered a name change.

COCO BANDICOOT

■ Originally appearing in *Crash Bandicoot 2*, Coco is Crash's sister. The complete opposite to her brother, she's a level-headed whizz-kid with a computer and fond of riding jet skis and tigers.

UKA UKA

■ The bad to Aku Aku's good, this mask represents the forces of evil and is the driving force for many of Cortex's bumbling plans. His eternal battle with Aku Aku is the foundation for *Crash Bash*'s minigames.

N. GIN

■ If the pun here wasn't enough, then the working engine attached to this scientist's head is in fact from an experiment gone wrong. He managed to stabilise it as a life support machine, but it cost him his sanity.

TINY TIGER

■ Irony clearly wasn't lost on Cortex when he named this minion. Supposedly the first of Cortex's experiments in genetic mutation, Tiny is a significant boss character throughout the series.

"Mark Cerny came to me and he said, 'Look, I want you to design levels and you come in and show them how the game needs to play'"

David Siller

But what happened to turn the name from Willie The Wombat to the more marketable, more catchy, more 'PlayStation' name of Crash Bandicoot?

"*Willie The Wombat* was what Jason and Andy loved," David claims. "They wanted that name. Trademark searches were done by Universal to try and trademark *Willie The Wombat*." What they found was a trademark by Hudson for its action-RPG released in Japan on the Sega Saturn also named *Willie The Wombat*. Though the game rose to little prominence, it was enough to dissuade Universal from running with that name. "We had everyone in this huge room at Universal and we put a list together," says David. "We said we have to have another name, we have to have it now." During this meeting, many names were thrown about until someone suggested' Crash Bandicoot'. The name stuck and the name was changed; *Crash Bandicoot* was born.

It's interesting to consider that, without the forceful hand of copyright law holding the original name back, *Crash Bandicoot* could've suffered a different fate. *Willie The Wombat* sounded ancient, the sort of title you'd see on the front of a cartridge, not on the CDs of the then-modern-feeling PlayStation. Even now, it's easy to see the importance of that name change, even if the name alone had no effect on the punkish attitude we've come to love Crash for. *Crash Bandicoot* was released in September 1996, almost a year to the day since the launch of the PlayStation itself. And, as it would turn out, it was an instant success for all involved.

Since Universal had signed Naughty Dog up for a three-game deal, it was clear what the next game ▶

CRASH BY NUMBERS

40.38 MILLION
Copies of Crash games sold

6,344
Crates in the original trilogy

52
Characters featuring across the series

18
Different games released since 1996

20:26
Fastest completion time of Crash Bandicoot: Warped's Time Trial stages

16
Different dangers Crash has had to run from, including a dinosaur, sharks and a tsunami

AS SEEN IN...

The wily bandicoot has spun his way off into other games, let's take a look...

SPYRO THE DRAGON: THE ETERNAL NIGHT

■ Spyro and Crash share many traits. Both are stars of platformers, both began on PlaySation and both were designed by Charles Zembillas. It's no surprise, then, to see Crash cameo in the *Spyro* game *The Eternal Night*, where he can be spotted in the frozen waters of the Celestial Caves.

UNCHARTED 4: A THIEF'S END

■ This was perhaps the most unexpected cameo, with Naughty Dog paying homage to the famed character it created in its epic *Uncharted* adventure. It was done in such a classy way, too, introduced with little fanfare as Nathan Drake teases his wife Elena as he tries to beat her score on the "TV game thingy".

SKYLANDERS: IMAGINATORS

■ Rumours and speculation of a new *Crash* game were rampant during the mid 2010s. One example came via a photo of *Skylanders* developer Vicarious Visions where a poster of a redesigned Crash was spotted in the background. Well, as it turns out, this developer ended up including the bandicoot in *Skylanders: Imaginators*.

TY THE TASMINIAN TIGER

■ While not a cameo in another game, Crash Bandicoot was used – alongside Spyro and Sonic – in an advert for *Ty The Tasmanian Tiger*. In the advert, the three stars are seen in a hospital battered, bandaged and sporting boomerangs lodged into their bodies. It was a result of aggressive marketing from EA, of course.

» [PS2] *Nitro Kart* was at least a very good-looking game, but that's really all it was. It was a modern version of *Crash Team Racing*, and that was it.

▶ was to be, so work on *Crash Bandicoot 2* began almost immediately. Though David left Universal and went to work at Capcom, many of his earlier gameplay designs and sketches were used in the *Crash* sequel. "Well, I left a lot of design stuff that was revamped," says David, detailing boss encounters in particular that they couldn't include in the original game. He had even previously created design specs on new elements for *Aero The Acro-Bat 3D* – a game series that David had worked on and brought the rights over to Universal with him – and many of these were used in Naughty Dog and Insomniac's games. "Mark Cerny had that copied and circled to both Naughty Dog and Insomniac to see where they might be influenced or wean ideas off of it since I was leaving it and Aero was going with me. They took whatever ideas they could."

With the popularity and success of *Crash Bandicoot* secured, Universal set about making sure this was a title worth holding onto. It increased the budget to $2 million to bring on talented programmers and additional artists. Before long, Evan Wells – now co-president of Naughty Dog – would be brought into the team. The two sequels were released within a year of each other: *Cortex Strikes Back* debuted in October 1997 and the third game was marked for November 1998. In both cases, the increased manpower and budgets made for significant improvements. With *Cortex Strikes Back*, a new 'Warp Room' was added, providing a more nonlinear format to the game's progression, while improvements to the graphics, the save system and the variety of the levels all helped to improve on what was an already stellar first release. Then there was *Crash Bandicoot: Warped*, which introduced underwater levels, motorbike stages and made Coco Bandicoot, Crash's sister, a playable character. Both were well-received and were established as PlayStation classics.

» [PS2] New gadgets were introduced into the franchise with *Wrath Of Cortex*, but they were mostly superficial.

Yet if we're complaining of the familiarity that these games came with, the next and final game in the series to be produced by Naughty Dog would offer something a little bit different. The fourth game began development at the same time as the third game and utilised *Warped*'s motorbike levels as a template. That's because this new game was to be a racing game, utilising the colourful cast of characters for head-to-head vehicular carnage. "When it got to *Crash Team Racing*, I would have done *Crash Team Off-road Racing*," explains David. "Instead of doing a derivative *Mario*-type game, I would have had these suspension-like little vehicles and lots of rolling mountains that you could fly through the air on like an off-road vehicle does and if you land on someone you destroy them and score and so on." While David is correct – *CTR* was very much a clone of Nintendo's insanely-popular *Mario Kart* – it was different to the other copycats, it was a kart racer that stood out and could hold its own against Mario and his friends. It was familiar to anyone lucky enough to have both the N64 and the PlayStation, with myriad weapons (many of which were copies of *Mario Kart*'s equivalent), tournaments and a battle mode. It did have its innovations, though: collecting the maximum number of Wumpa Fruit in a race would unlock an enhanced version of whichever weapon you picked up. And the time trial mode included numbered boxes that would freeze the clock and persuade the player to race down a specific route.

Despite starting development at the same time as *Warped*, *Crash Team Racing* wouldn't be released on PlayStation until September 1999. The change in genre didn't affect the franchise's popularity, though. *CTR* went on to sell well over 5 million copies and received incredible praise from critics. Yet, although Crash had already set himself in the halls of videogame fame, this would be the last time the franchise would be released

» [PlayStation] While Coco was a playable character in *Crash 3*, she was restricted to the vehicular levels.

» [PlayStation] The minigames available in *Crash Bash* are entertaining, but they don't hold a candle to *Mario Party*.

"We put a list together and we said we have to have another name, we have to have it now"

David Siller

with such confidence. Naughty Dog chose to end its affiliation with *Crash Bandicoot*, and as the series began transitioning to the PlayStation 2, where it struggled to find the same level of appreciation.

Before the PS2, however, Sony and Universal looked to squeeze as much as they could out of Crash and company, releasing *Crash Bash* on PlayStation in November 2000. This party game was 'different', to say the least, pitting the characters of the franchise in arena battles. It was a set of minigames in the vein of *Mario Party* – the first of which was released two years prior on the Nintendo 64. While Eurocom's effort on *Crash Bash* was commendable, it lacked the quality of similar titles, while the limited popularity of the PlayStation's Multitap meant it only appealed to a small audience. It ended up passing many people by.

It's at this point that the history of *Crash Bandicoot* becomes messy. Having built a solid foundation, all the hard work of Universal and Naughty Dog would unravel. It's hard to point the finger in any one direction, but many will agree it all begins from one source. Universal Interactive Studios was bought out by Seagrams at this point, but it was at the end of 2000 when ▶

SLAPSTICK DEATHS

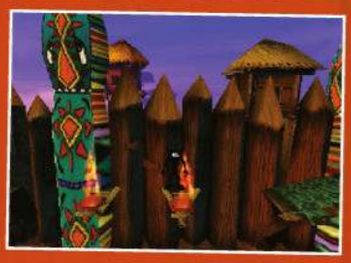
Crash is known for losing his lives in many hilarious ways

BIFF!

■ The classic death animation. Crash spins around before tumbling down.

BOOM!

■ Looks like our hero got too close to some TNT, all that's left is his footwear and eyeballs.



BURN!

■ One charcoal bandicoot – it's what you'd expect from landing on some fire.

CRUSH!

■ Not outrunning the boulder in time, Crash experiences what it's like to be a piece of paper.

SPLASH!

■ Like most heroes of the time, Crash didn't graduate from swimming school.

SQUISH!

■ Similar to the boulder death, only this time Crash tries to save face by doing a situp.

CHOMP!

■ This dangerous plant likes to exclusively eat early PlayStation mascots, bad luck for Crash.

ZAP!

■ Like most things, Crash doesn't like being electrocuted. Who would've thought?

YIKES!

■ Crash's nightmares of being caught with his pants down come true, thanks to this swordsman.

SMOOCH!

■ We'd die of embarrassment if we were to be kissed by a frog, to be honest.

MAKING A MASCOT

All the ingredients that went into Crash's design

■ At first, *Crash* was jokingly named '*Sonic's Ass Game*' due to the camera being behind the character, he was then named *Willie The Wombat*. This was the case throughout development until a licensing search revealed that a little-known action RPG made by Hudson and released only in Japan forced a name change.

■ Besides for a handful of, 'Woah's', Crash doesn't speak. This was intentional from the start, since Naughty Dog believed that videogame characters that were voiced at the time usually only added negatively to the experience and distracted from players identifying as the character.

■ Crash doesn't have a neck, a facet that Jason Rubin and Andy Gavin had gleaned from Warner Bros' Tasmanian Devil. Naughty Dog was inspired by Taz and his crazy, destructive attitude; the Tasmanian Devil also performs an aggressive whirlwind spin.

■ The colour for Crash's fur was decided first by listing popular mascot characters and their colours and then excluding those shades. Other earthy colours were discarded so he would be discernible in-game. Other colours – like red – were excluded due to how they interacted with old TVs. Orange was the only colour left.

■ Elements, such as Crash's gloves or the lighter patches of fur, were added to the in-game model to help the player distinguish which direction the character was facing at any given time. The gloves were changed for his HD era games into tribal tattoos.

■ Despite his three-quarter length jeans and Converse-style shoes being very much a part of the American punk/skateboarder scene during the Nineties and the original game's conception, this combination has actually stuck with the character throughout the decades – and it still works for him, too.

■ Crash was always planned to be a marsupial. The options at the time included bandicoot and potoroo. The opening for *Crash Bandicoot* pans into Dr Cortex's laboratory, if you look at the cages on the left of the lab you'll see other marsupials are being tested on.

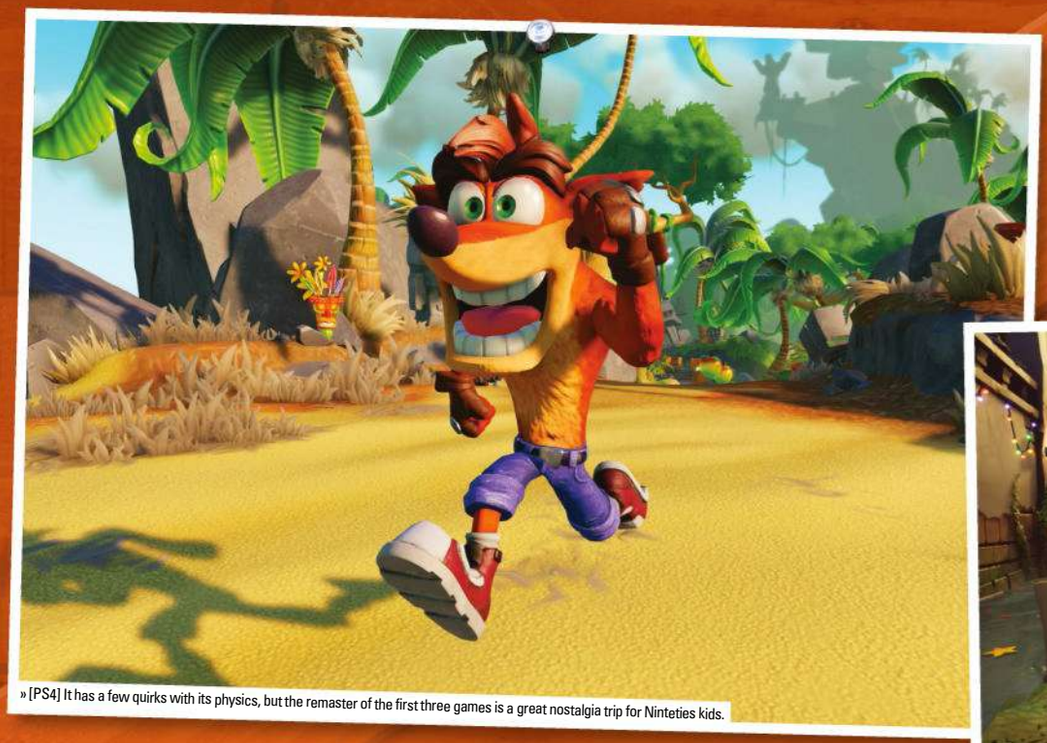
» [PS3] *Crash Of The Titans* focused more heavily on combat, rather than the classic platforming gameplay of old.

▶ the company switched hands again, this time to the media powerhouse Vivendi. Almost immediately priorities changed, and with Naughty Dog busy developing *Jak And Daxter*, *Crash Bandicoot* would go on to be put in the hands of a number of developers in the hopes of creating something that could stick.

The first of the PS2 games was *Crash Bandicoot: The Wrath Of Cortex*, with a new developer on the franchise, Traveller's Tales. It was to be an open-world title and incorporate puzzle elements. Universal, however, sought a new publishing partner and, in doing so, made an agreement with Konami to publish the game across multiple platforms, breaking its obligations with Sony. The result would be a separation between Sony, Mark Cerny – who had been designing the open-world gameplay – and Universal. While *Crash* was now open to a wider number of people, this decision had an unexpected knock-on effect. With Mark Cerny no longer working on the project, Traveller's Tales was forced to return to a system used in the last traditional *Crash* game, *Warped*, with a system of individual stages rather than an open environment. This shift did not correspond to additional time to complete the game, and Traveller's Tales was given only 12 months to complete development. And it showed. Many ironically drew attention to the unchanged *Crash* formula, while others criticised load times and frustrating gameplay.

What followed was a barrage of titles, each failing to utilise the character in any significant way. Vicarious Visions was given control over the handheld outings, releasing *Crash Bandicoot: The Huge Adventure* in 2002, *N-Tranced* in 2003 and *Crash Bandicoot Purple: Ripto's Revenge* – a crossover with *Spyro The Dragon* – in 2004. Meanwhile, Traveller's Tales returned with *Twinsanity*, another platforming outing for the bandicoot that did little to mix things up, aside from pairing Crash and the villainous

» [PS2] *Crash Tag Team Racing* continued to rip-off *Mario Kart*, this time it was *Double Dash*.



» [PS4] It has a few quirks with its physics, but the remaster of the first three games is a great nostalgia trip for Nineties kids.

» [PS4] Crash and Coco returned in 2020 for a full sequel. *Crash Bandicoot 4* is a wonderfully faithful follow-up.

Dr Neo Cortex together. Though it would be one of the better-received titles of the generation, it suffered in comparison to *Jak And Daxter*, which had already been dominating the genre at this point.

There was still *Crash Bandicoot*'s spinoff to consider, too; *Crash Team Racing* had proven so popular it was believed the gold vein could be mined some more. Vicarious Visions was given control of the development of the next kart racer that would become *Crash Nitro Kart*, released in 2003. It gave the classic kart gaming a PS2 overhaul but offered very little new. Then there was *Crash Tag Team Racing* in 2005, developed by a newcomer to the series, Radical Entertainment. As you'd expect from the title, *CTTR* wasn't original, mimicking the very same two-characters-per-kart gimmick that *Mario Kart* had implemented with *Double Dash*. *Crash*'s kart series had always been a little *too* much of a clone, but this was taking it a bit far. This, combined with poor controls, led to *Tag Team Racing* getting very little praise.

"It was a good kart racer," says Joe McGinn, key designer on *CTTR*, before admitting that it wasn't a "great kart racer". "I think we took on a bit too much, the scope was too much because this was a 12-month project. [The publisher] liked the idea of integrating this platformer component as well, so it was not only a kart racer but there was this theme park where you were jumping around, collecting things, interacting with characters and stuff. It wasn't bad per se, but it did add a lot to it and it did take up a lot of our resources."

Up until this point, there hadn't been much in the way of 'true' oddities for the franchise. The first and only would come from Dimps, a developer which had success making *Sonic Advance* titles for the GBA. Its game, *Crash Boom Bang!*, would be the second and final party game in the series, and launched on Nintendo DS. It flopped and was criticised for everything from its controls to its skin-deep use of the characters.

But the time had come for *Crash* to move over to the next console generation, and though *Crash Tag Team* Racing hadn't been well received, Radical Entertainment was put to task on the next two platformers. *Crash Of The Titans* launched in 2007, bringing a feature that allowed Crash to ride on the back of beasts. *Mind Over Mutant* was released a year later, this time becoming even more of an action game, as Crash gained the ability to control mutants and use them to dodge, counter, and choose between light and heavy attacks. Neither game sold well. The initial high of *Crash Bandicoot* had waned and there wasn't much call for a new *Crash* game. "At that time, it wasn't old enough to be retro," says Joe. "What I mean by that is that adult gamers weren't interested in *Crash*. Adult gamers were all playing *GTA* or *Halo*, and *Crash* targeted kids."

There was one more significant change for the series though that has meant we've not seen another *Crash Bandicoot* game since 2010 (*Crash Nitro Kart 2*). Around the release of *Mind Over Mutant*, Vivendi merged with Activision and with the publisher now in charge, its ruling eye would fall on Crash. As fond as many would recall the PlayStation era, it was clear it was an underperforming series and Activision isn't a company to back products that won't appeal to a mainstream audience. *Crash* has, as a result, sat barely used for more than half a decade.

Until now, that is. Almost out of nowhere, Activision released *Crash Bandicoot N.Sane Trilogy*, which is an impressive remaster of the first three games that is been developed by Vicarious Visions. It's been incredibly well-received by both the press and consumers, which has led to a full *Crash* sequel: *Crash 4*, appropriately subtitled *It's About Time*. It seems after years in the doghouse, Crash has finally had the revival that he deserves. After all, he's royalty these days, and we can't picture videogaming without him.

BANJO-KAZOOIE

If you were betting on adventurers to defeat an evil witch, neither a lazy bear nor a sarcastic bird would give particularly favourable odds. The unlikely combination of the two, though? Easy money. Join Nick Thorpe as he examines the career of two of Rare's most beloved characters

When we think of console gaming in the late Nineties, certain memories always feature very prominently – the dodgy commentary of football games, the rise of the 3D fighting game and the need to hunt down every last item in 3D platformers. Make no mistake, the 'collectathon' mascot platformer was one of gaming's hottest subgenres during the N64 years – and *Banjo-Kazooie* was the game that started the trend. Riding high off the success of the *Donkey Kong Country* series and *GoldenEye*, Rare was one of the world's leading development teams and perhaps the only team capable of making the unusual pairing of a sarcastic bird with a lazy bear work, thanks to its trademark sense of humour. With that in mind, it's funny that neither Banjo nor Kazooie originally appeared in the plans for the game they'd debut in, and it wasn't originally a mascot platformer at all.

It all started with a dream – or more precisely *Project Dream*. *Project Dream* was a SNES adventure game that featured a young boy named Edison, who would become involved with a pirate crew led by Captain Blackeye. The plan was to utilise the same graphical approach as *Donkey Kong Country*, which had become a smash hit largely due to its incredible pre-rendered 3D visuals. However, technology was moving on and Nintendo's next platform was on the way, so work transferred to the N64. This would allow the game to play out in full 3D, but it was a move that caused the team some issues.

» [Nintendo 64] Visiting Bottles to learn new moves was vital to ensure you'd explored every nook and cranny.

» [Nintendo 64] wLarge structures like poor old Clanker here were very impressive, acting as distinct environments within stages.

» [Nintendo 64] Reaching high vantage points gave some impressive views of *Banjo-Kazooie*'s stages.

DYNAMIC DUOS

Some of gaming's other great double acts

POPO AND NANA

DEBUT: Ice Climber **YEAR:** 1985

■ Working together to climb the mountain only works so well in *Ice Climber*, as bonus stages for Popo and Nana turn into competition. However, when they decide to team up to fight everybody else they're an absolute nightmare, as players of *Super Smash Bros Melee* will tell you.

BUB AND BOB

DEBUT: Bubble Bobble **YEAR:** 1986

■ They might not perform the fancy team-up moves of other duos, but they make up for it by being probably the cutest pair on the list. They're also incredibly prolific, appearing across not only the many *Bubble Bobble* games but the *Puzzle Bobble* (or *Bust-A-Move*) spin-off series as well.

HEAD AND HEELS

DEBUT: Head Over Heels **YEAR:** 1987

■ The dual heroes of this Eighties classic were the perfect complement to one another, with Head's high jumps and enemy-stunning attacks working extremely well alongside Heels' speed and ability to carry objects. As you controlled both, making use of their abilities was essential to making progress.

SONIC AND TAILS

DEBUT: Sonic The Hedgehog 2 **YEAR:** 1992

■ Sonic's vulpine mate wasn't initially a great help – an excellent invincible shield when controlled by a second player in the main game, but a total liability in the hands of the CPU during special stages. In *Sonic 3* Tails became rather more useful, as he could carry Sonic while flying.

CHANG AND CHOI

DEBUT: The King Of Fighters '94 **YEAR:** 1994

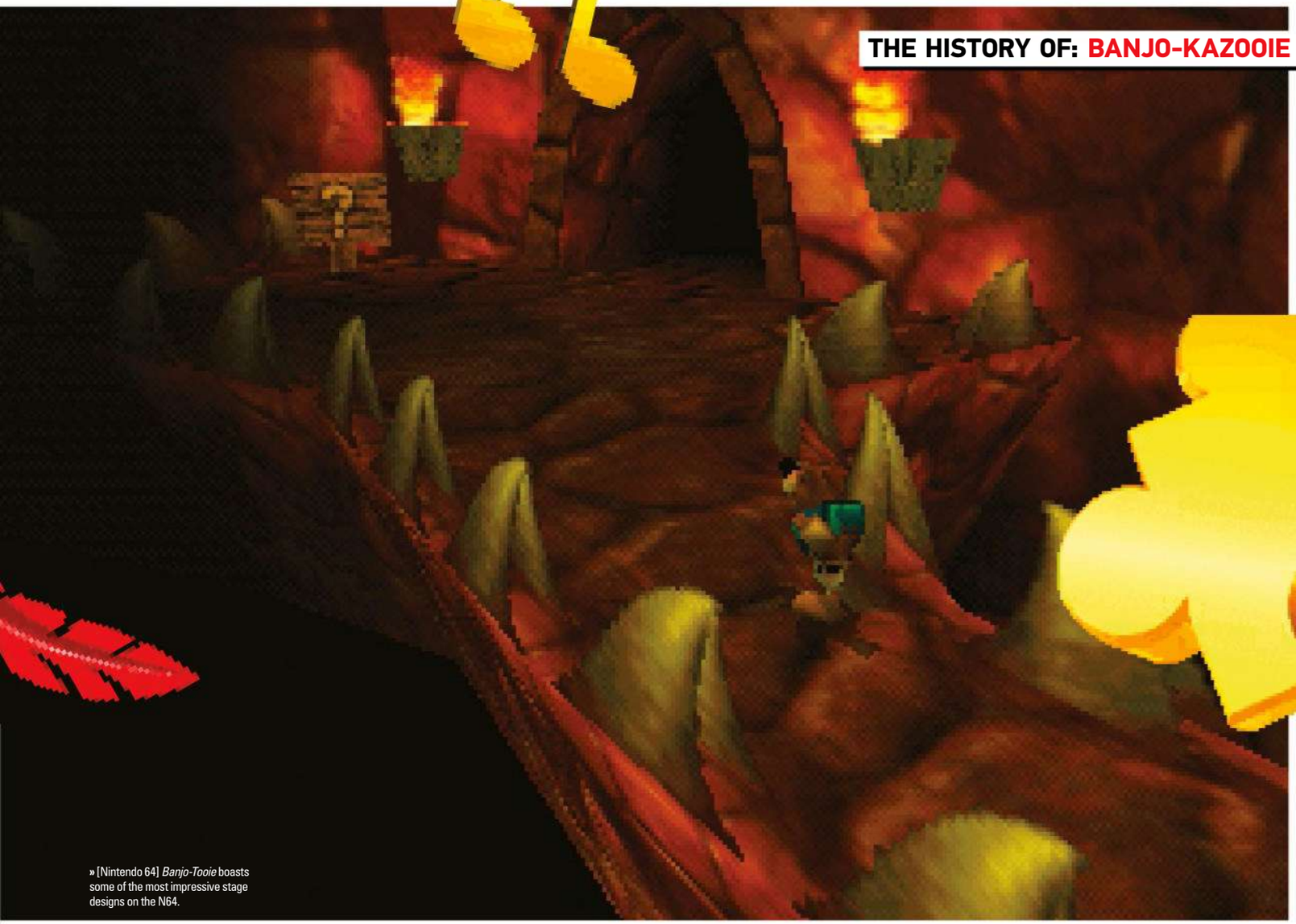
■ These perennial teammates are a criminal duo, noted as much for their fearsome fighting skills as their comically contrasting sizes. Their crowning moment of cooperation came in *Capcom Vs SNK 2*, in which they fight alongside one another to take advantage of the numbers game. Underhanded? Of course – they're criminals.

» [Nintendo 64] The plot of *Banjo-Tooie* was darker than that of the original, with Bottles being killed early on.

» [Nintendo 64] Grunty shows off her skeletal look for *Banjo-Tooie*, acquired after being trapped under a boulder in *Banjo-Kazooie*.

"Coming from developing *Donkey Kong Country*, we'd been used to producing extremely high definition in our visuals," explains Chris Sutherland, credited as chief keyboard tapper on *Banjo-Kazooie*. "With the N64, we initially wanted to render the 3D models' geometry directly. Unfortunately, the reality of 'Project Reality' was that the kind of tech to handle the quality we wanted was still years away." The team attempted an approach that combined a 3D landscape with 2D sprites, but camera freedom exposed problems with the multilayered sprites – as the view shifted, overlapping sprites would swap over one another. At the same time, the *Conker* team had made great strides with a fully 3D approach, and *Project Dream* switched to match.

Of course, it wouldn't be the only change that was made. The game slowly metamorphosed, first with the replacement of Edison as the protagonist. "When we swapped in a bear we amended the speech for the bear character – so originally he did speak real words, with 'guhuh' noises too," explains Chris, who provided Banjo's voice. Notably, Kazooie was absent at this point, leading to the early characterisation seen in *Diddy Kong Racing*. Banjo's partner arrived as a justification for a design decision. By this point, the game had transitioned to being a more traditional 3D platformer, and the team had wanted to give Banjo a double jump as a result. This was represented with wings emerging from his backpack, but this looked odd on its own, so Kazooie was created to help it make sense.



» [Nintendo 64] *Banjo-Tooie* boasts some of the most impressive stage designs on the N64.

"Our aims were generally to make it bigger and better than the first in terms of world size and variety"

Chris Sutherland

Despite its convoluted route to completion, *Banjo-Kazooie* became an instant classic upon its release in the summer of 1998. The game racked up sales effortlessly and review scores were high all around, with many critics at the time declaring that the game had surpassed Nintendo's classic *Super Mario 64*. It undeniably held the edge in some respects – the rich texturing of *Banjo-Kazooie*'s worlds made it one of the best-looking games to have been released on the N64, and the game's dual protagonists and humorous writing gave it a much greater sense of character. If there was one criticism that could be aimed at *Banjo-Kazooie*, it was one that was common to many 3D games of the time – the camera could be a little wayward, not always being as helpful as it could be.

It's arguable that if no sequel to *Banjo-Kazooie* had been planned, the game's runaway success would have made one inevitable. However, *Banjo-Tooie* was known to be on the cards as the title was mentioned at the close of the first game. "Our aims were generally to make it bigger and better than the first," Chris explains, "both in terms of the world size and also the variety – by having the main characters split up and also by adding multiplayer play." With the collectathon platforming of the original proving so popular, the decision to go with an improved version of the first game made a lot of sense.

Having failed in her attempt to steal the good looks of Banjo's sister Tooty in the first game, the series antagonist Gruntilda was out for revenge. Two years spent trapped under a boulder

JIGGIES AND JALOPIES

The cameos that have bookended Banjo's career

Banjo's debut appearance wasn't actually in his own game but in Rare's Nintendo 64 racer *Diddy Kong Racing*. Releasing over six months before *Banjo-Kazooie*, the game features a rather early version of Banjo, with some unusual characterisation. Although his trademark utterance "guhuh!" is present and correct, he speaks English normally when announcing his name. What's more, Kazooie doesn't accompany him, marking the only occasion in which one appeared in a game without the other. Another *Banjo-Kazooie* character does make an appearance, though – the turtle Tiptup, who would later make an appearance as the choir conductor in Bubblegloop Swamp. Also making his debut was Conker, who arrived with a rather sweeter demeanour than the foulmouthed squirrel we saw in *Bad Fur Day*. Like Banjo, he was introduced to build familiarity with players before the release of his own game.

At the other end of Banjo's career, we have Banjo and Kazooie making a cameo appearance in *Sonic & Sega All-Stars Racing*. Sega had been speaking with platform holders about exclusive content for individual versions, but in the end, only Microsoft came through, securing Rare's characters a spot in the Xbox 360 version. The two actually made for a more sensible fit than many of Sega's own inclusions – after all, *Nuts & Bolts* was a vehicle-based game. Then, paying tribute to their Nintendo 64 days, the dynamic duo entered the fray in *Super Smash Bros Ultimate* as part of the game's post-launch DLC offering. They had their own stage, too, based on Spiral Mountain.

COLLECTION CAPERS

The Banjo-Kazooie games are renowned for their collectables – just how many are there?

BANJO-KAZOOIE

900 NOTES
USED TO ACCESS DOORS IN GRUNTY'S LAIR

100 JIGGIES
USED TO ACCESS NEW STAGES

100 MUMBO TOKENS
USED TO ACTIVATE MUMBO'S MAGIC

45 JINJOS USED TO GAIN JIGGIES

24 HONEYCOMB PIECES GAIN EXTRA HIT POINTS

PLUS...
• BLUE EGGS • RED FEATHERS
• GOLDEN FEATHERS

BANJO-TOOIE

160 NOTE NESTS
EACH CONTAINING 5 NOTES, USED TO LEARN NEW MOVES

10 TREBLE CLEFS
EACH CONTAINING 20 NOTES

45 JINJOS USED TO GAIN JIGGIES

90 JIGGIES
USED TO ACCESS NEW STAGES

18 GLOWBOS
USED TO ACTIVATE MUMBO'S MAGIC

24 HONEYCOMB PIECES GAIN EXTRA HIT POINTS

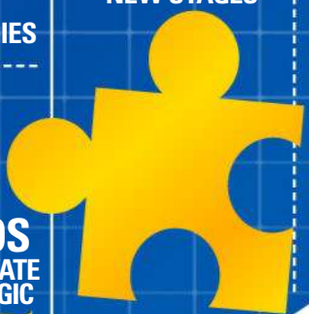
PLUS...
• RED FEATHERS • GOLDEN FEATHERS
• BLUE EGGS • FIRE EGGS • ICE EGGS
• CLOCKWORK KAZOOIE EGGS
• GRENADE EGGS

BANJO-KAZOOIE NUTS & BOLTS

5230 NOTES USED TO BUY ITEMS

131 JIGGIES
USED TO ACCESS NEW STAGES

92 TT TROPHIES
USED TO GET JIGGIES



» [GBA] Standard *Banjo-Kazooie* elements such as boss battles remained present in *Grunty's Revenge*.

» [GBA] New minigames included sheep dipping and this slide game, in which you collect eggs.

▶ reduced her to a skeletal form, and she was out to restore her body by sucking the life of other creatures. Banjo and Kazooie once again set out to stop her, but not before she manages to kill Bottles. Luckily the duo retains all of the moves they were taught in the first game and gain new abilities in the second including the ability to split up.

With *Banjo-Kazooie* having already been an impressive game, the team faced challenges in creating the bigger, better experience they had envisioned. "The *Banjo-Tooie* engine had to cope with much larger worlds, so we had to juggle what was in and out of memory as the player moved around the level," explains Chris. The addition of multiplayer also required a lot of reworking, as the original code assumed that the entire game was single-player. But surprisingly, one of the game's new collectables proved to be one of the most problematic inclusions: "The Clockwork Kazooie bomb turned out to be more of a challenge due to the ability to direct it into other areas of the world like any other playable character and trigger other events, sometimes in the originating area. This meant there was always a good source of bugs, some of which we didn't spot and crept into the final game."

Banjo-Tooie launched late in 2000, to a response almost as enthusiastic as that which had greeted its predecessor. Millions of sales were achieved, and critical response was again universally positive. The game's larger areas and improved visuals were lauded, but both came at a cost. Some design improvements made things slightly more manageable, such as non-respawning notes, but it was simply much harder to keep track of what was going on in the wider world of *Banjo-Tooie* due to the frequent need to backtrack. Also, while the visuals were some of the most detailed to have been seen on the N64, the system often dropped frames as it struggled to cope with them. Despite the promise of a *Banjo-Threeie* at the end of the game, the N64 was near the end of its life – any sequel was going to have to come on a new machine.

» [GBA] The early development of *Banjo-Pilot* took place with alternate branding as *Diddy Kong Pilot*.

At the time, it was easy to assume that the new machine would be Nintendo's GameCube. However, this would not come to pass as Nintendo sold Rare to Microsoft in 2002 – but not before Rare had started a variety of Game Boy Advance projects, two of which were Banjo games. The years that followed were rather difficult for the bird and bear, as neither of the Game Boy Advance titles lived up to the standard of the N64 adventures. The first of these was an isometric adventure set between the first two games, *Banjo-Kazooie: Grunty's Revenge*.

Upon its mid-2001 unveiling, *Grunty's Revenge* looked to be targeting a similar experience to the home console games, with large open areas, moves to be learned including Kazooie's ability to fly, and lots of items to collect. The sale of Rare put the game's future in doubt, but Microsoft allowed the project to continue as the Game Boy Advance was not competing against any Microsoft products – however, a publisher would have to be found. THQ picked the game up in 2003, and subsequent interviews with Rare explained that the original "sprawling, unwieldy" maps had been refined. However, comments made by a former Rare programmer suggest that the problem was one ▶

» [GBA] Though the Game Boy Advance couldn't handle large 3D environments, the isometric perspective simulated them well.

» [Xbox 360] Above: Time Trial races in *Nuts & Bolts* awarded trophies, which in turn awarded jiggies.
» [Xbox 360] Right: *Nuts & Bolts* finally introduced the Stop 'N' Swop feature first promised in the original game.

of cartridge capacity – stages and features needed to be cut to stay within the size limit, dropping the game from a planned nine stages to six, including the Spiral Mountain hub world. One of the features cut was flight, which simply wasn't working well with the 3D collision engine that was introduced during the game's publisher-less year.

Banjo-Kazooie: Grunty's Revenge was released in the autumn of 2003 to a mixed response, with reviews ranging from highly desirable 90% scores to a rather damning 4/10. The majority of critics agreed that the main adventure was of a high quality, singling out the gameplay for praise. However the cutbacks had clearly taken their toll, as the most common complaint was that the game was entirely too short, ending just as it seemed to be getting going.

The next game, *Banjo-Pilot*, was actually revealed to the world shortly before *Grunty's Revenge*, but would emerge much later due to a rather tortured development. Originally announced in May 2001 as *Diddy Kong Pilot*, the game was an aerial racer with a Mode 7-style floor effect and tilt controls for steering. Unfortunately, the game wasn't progressing tremendously well and missed its scheduled early 2002 release date. But any hope of fixing it as a Diddy Kong game flew away when Rare was sold to Microsoft. As well as suffering from the same need to find a publisher that delayed *Grunty's Revenge*, the team now needed to perform a visual overhaul to remove Nintendo's characters. Luckily, Rare had a mascot character ready to climb into the cockpit – Banjo would have his own racing spin-off.

But first, the disappointing aspects of *Diddy Kong Pilot* needed to be corrected. Rare chose to go down a new route, resulting in a total overhaul of the game. The big problem with *Diddy Kong Pilot*'s flat landscapes was that they didn't make a whole lot of sense in a game about flight, a glaring flaw that the game's new engine corrected with 3D voxel landscapes. While tracks were short, they were impressive for the hardware. By the spring of 2004, *Banjo-Pilot* was shown off in screenshots for the first time in a couple of years, sporting its new engine and looking very nice. However, this version of the game was quietly cancelled later in the year, with speculation suggesting that the game didn't run quickly enough under the new engine.

Having entered development around the time of the Game Boy Advance launch, *Banjo-Pilot* finally arrived in January 2005, by which point the console had already been superseded by the Nintendo DS. Returning to the flat tracks of the original *Diddy Kong Pilot* design, the game was a solid

» [Xbox 360] While very little traditional platforming was found in *Nuts & Bolts*, a little bit still remained.

SILICON SNIGGERS

How the N64's development hardware kept Rare laughing

With the *Banjo-Kazooie* series being well-known for its sense of humour, you might imagine that the development team at Rare would have an established comedy dynamic behind the scenes – and you wouldn't be wrong. "The N64 titles were developed on Silicon Graphics Indy workstations," Chris explains. "The way those operated, you could silently log into anyone else's machine without them knowing, but you still had access to the hardware. That meant you could grab a screenshot of someone's desktop, or even from their webcam if they had one switched on – seems kind of crazy nowadays, I know!"

It does, but we can only briefly imagine our own applications for this prankster's heaven before Chris reveals how Rare's staff took advantage of it. "During development, when you least expected it, someone would log in and play some comedy sound files on your machine, to your surprise and others' amusement – ah, see what fun we're missing now with internet security!" We can only hope that the occasional Kazooie 'bree!' sound was thrown in…

> "Some people want to be '100 percenters' and so you want to give them that challenge"
>
> Chris Sutherland

but unremarkable kart-style racer, differentiated mostly by the floaty physics of its vehicles. A lukewarm critical reception followed as a result, marking a rather underwhelming farewell to Nintendo hardware.

Despite Rare's acquisition by Microsoft, Banjo and Kazooie took a long time to reach the Xbox family, missing the big black box and finally appearing on the Xbox 360. But when they finally made the jump, it's safe to say that the game was not what many fans had expected. The first teaser video revealed that the game was not to be *Banjo-Threeie* in the traditional style – Banjo and Kazooie had received makeovers, sporting a chunkier look than on the N64. However, it was the reveal that delivered the biggest surprise. Collectables were out, the old moves were out, and even platforming was given the boot. *Banjo-Kazooie: Nuts & Bolts* would be a vehicular action game.

Grunty, now reduced to a skeletal head, was out for revenge against Banjo and Kazooie. The heroic pair had rather let themselves go though, having spent the last eight years doing anything other than adventuring. They're sent to finally settle their differences by the Lord Of Games, a creator of games who decrees that they will compete for control of Spiral Mountain, with the losing team forced to work in his game factory. From there Banjo and Kazooie need to obtain jiggies from vehicle-based challenges, which they have the freedom to approach in any manner thanks to highly customisable vehicles.

Perhaps influenced by recent assessments of collectathon platformers which tended to be heavily critical, the *Nuts & Bolts* team rather reduced the number of collectables in the game. The story also took a critical approach to the item-gathering gameplay of the Nintendo 64 games, lampooning it with typical self-deprecating humour. While Chris didn't work on *Banjo-Kazooie: Nuts & Bolts* (save to provide the voices for the characters), the balance of collectables is a design point that he is keen to talk about. "Some people want to be '100 percenters' and so you want to give them that challenge," he explains. "Ideally as long as a game can make the player *want* to collect the needed items without it feeling like a list of chores, then the number of the items is less relevant, but obviously the more items you need to collect the harder it is to keep the player feeling enthused." Ultimately, only jiggies and notes remained from the classic *Banjo-Kazooie* games, with new time trial trophies adding a third level.

As you might expect, long-term fans of the series gave *Banjo-Kazooie: Nuts & Bolts* a rough ride. The visual changes were poorly received, but it was the radical gameplay changes that really provoked online anger, with a vocal minority claiming that the game was a monstrosity that had ruined the series. However, the reception from those less heavily invested in the idea of a new platformer was actually rather good. The game was praised for its long-term value, with the vehicle-building aspect of the game greeted enthusiastically by reviewers. However, some concerns were raised about loose handling. Structurally, the missions came in for criticism for being repetitive, and the game's interfaces and tutorials were considered obtrusive and not quite up to scratch. Despite the criticisms, the reception was good and exceeded that of the Game Boy Advance games.

Though *Nuts & Bolts* was the last game to star Banjo and Kazooie, they've been sighted in a couple of cameo appearances since, joining the cast of *Sonic & Sega All-Stars Racing* on the Xbox 360 and acting as a player skin in *Minecraft: Xbox 360 Edition,* as well as an appearance in *Super Smash Bros Ultimate*. In spite of their quiet spell, the enduring popularity of the characters means that we'd never be surprised to see them return. Beloved mascots are hard to come by in videogames, and the excellence often displayed in the *Banjo-Kazooie* games serves to solidify the appeal of the unusual pairing. So while there are no plans for the duo on the horizon, don't be too surprised if you hear the "guhuh!" that has become symbolic of the series emerging from an Xbox console in the future.

» [Xbox 360] The impressive environments of *Nuts & Bolts* drew inspiration from the N64 games, retaining recognisable elements like this striped bridge.

THE HISTORY OF PSYCHONAUTS

» Tim Schafer has created a number of acclaimed games, including *Full Throttle* and *Grim Fandango*.

MORE THAN 15 YEARS IN THE MAKING, DOUBLE FINE'S PSYCHONAUTS 2 RECENTLY LANDED TO THUNDEROUS OVATION FROM FANS AND CRITICS ALIKE. INDUSTRY LEGEND, TIM SCHAFER GUIDES US THROUGH THE STORIED SAGA BEHIND THE BELOVED PLATFORMING SERIES

WORDS BY HARETH AL BUSTANI

» [PC] The Motherlobe is the Psychonauts' headquarters, and serves as a base of operations in *Psychonauts 2*, with numerous collectibles hidden in its brainy bowels.

When Tim Schafer walked away from LucasArts in 2000, having just released the great swan song of adventure gaming, *Grim Fandango*, he'd already established himself as one of the most creative minds in the business. However, he was just getting started. After setting up his own company, Double Fine, he set the wheels in motion for a game that had been brewing for years.

The project was rooted in Tim's long-time fascination with psychology. He recalls, "I studied dreams in college, and thinking about how people represent emotional states in abstract imagery and metaphors, especially in their sleep, was always interesting to me." Years prior, he'd even briefly considered working these ideas into the legendary point-and-click title, *Full Throttle*. "In *Full Throttle*, I wanted to have this interactive peyote trip where Ben would take peyote in the desert and then wander through his own mind; kind of like Jim Morrison in *The Doors* movie – where he just goes off into the desert and tries to see the elephant. What could that mean? That kind of symbolism was really fun." Although that particular idea "didn't really seem to fit within *Full Throttle*", Tim held onto it.

Later, while working on an unrealised spy game (supposedly a cross between *Shaft*, *James Bond*, kung-fu cinema and *2001: A Space Odyssey*) he returned to the idea; designing a mechanic where gamers could meditate on objects in order to experience visions about them, and gain clues about their significance. "I was pitching that around to people and later someone was like, 'Hey, what about that game where you go into other people's minds?', and I was like, 'Oh no, you go into your own mind. But wait a second … that's better! So, I just started ruminating on that for years."

Once Tim was at the helm of Double Fine, what began as a misunderstanding over who explored whose mind, started to snowball into a fully realised world of its own. The resultant project was *Psychonauts*, a platform game where players use psychic explorers to travel through levels, set within other characters' minds. "It came from brainstorming over all the great psychic powers that people fantasise about having, and how you could make puzzles out of that," continues Tim. "And then, thinking about different types of minds; like, 'Oh I just met someone who seems like a narcissist, what would their mind look like? Would it all look like them? What colour would the sky be in their world?'"

> "IT CAME FROM BRAINSTORMING OVER ALL THE GREAT PSYCHIC POWERS THAT PEOPLE FANTASISE ABOUT HAVING, AND HOW YOU COULD MAKE PUZZLES OUT OF THAT"
> TIM SCHAFER

Tim enlisted the help of art director Scott Campbell, and LucasArts alumni Peter Chan, the concept artist who'd worked on both *Grim Fandango* and *Full Throttle*, to develop a visual language. While Scott set about illustrating ideas for characters, Peter recently said in the *20 Double Fine Years* book, "My kids were little at the time and I was reading a lot of J Otto Siebold books, and they became an inspiration, as did *Tim Burton's The Nightmare Before Christmas*. Both of those have this whimsical style that I could reference alongside Scott's characters." Scott would ▶

» [PC] Tim says coming up with ideas for the first game was easy, "I'd never seen black velvet in a videogame before."

POWER UP!

HERE'S A RUNDOWN OF OUR FAVOURITE PSI-POWERS

Telekinesis

Raz can use Telekinesis to raise objects and hurl them around using his mind. The power takes the form of a psychic hand which plucks whatever, or whoever, Raz wishes to ragdoll, and throws them around with glee.

Clairvoyance

Raz can use Clairvoyance to see through other people's eyes, either directly, or through one of their more meaningful belongings. Amazingly, if the player looks at Raz, his character model is replaced with a series of unique 2D images, representing how he's perceived.

PSI Blast

Quite simply, the PSI Blast, or Marksmanship, is the act of firing laser beams out of one's cranium. Raz can either shoot at will, or lock onto targets to make life a little easier.

Pyrokinesis

Not something to be trifled with, Pyrokinesis is the art of setting things on fire using your mind. The power, which needs to charge up, features a thermometer, which eventually turns red, signalling it's time to raise the heat.

Levitation

One of the more frequently used powers, this creates a Levitation Ball, which Raz can ride atop, lift objects with, and even use as a parachute.

Mental Projection

Using Mental Projection, Raz can summon a Jungian archetype, able to fit itself into tiny little spaces, distract enemies during fights and even heal Raz with a Mental Energy boost.

Mental Connection

Using Mental Connection, Psychonauts can use a psychic grappling hook to link thoughts together, influencing someone's decision-making. It also allows players to quickly traverse, by catapulting between thoughts and enemies to otherwise unreachable spots.

draw characters over and over, dozens of times, until he was happy with them.

Before long, the team had a working concept; the game would follow Razputin 'Raz' Aquato, a young circus acrobat, in his efforts to join an international team of psychic spies called the Psychonauts. After Raz sneaks into the Whispering Rock training camp, he's shocked to learn that one of his trainers, Coach Oleander has lost the plot and hired a mad dentist-scientist to kidnap several Psychonauts and trainees. Their plan is to steal the psychics' brains, and use them to power an army of psychic death tanks, before taking over the world. Raz must save the day – not by leaving a path of destruction in his wake – but by entering the minds of his friends and enemies, and helping heal them from within.

With the concept in place, Double Fine doubled down on level design. Each stage would be entirely unlike any other, reflecting a variety of intricate psychological themes, representing the states of each character's psyche. Every level featured a brand-new art style, with an immense range of unique textures, models and characters. Raz would navigate his way through these, simultaneously solving elaborate puzzles with an array of psychic abilities, ranging from Telekinesis to Clairvoyance. At the end of each stage, players would face a psychological 'boss' fight, resulting in the resolution of that character's trauma.

> "WE LIKED TO MAKE GAMES THAT MADE PEOPLE FEEL A LITTLE UNCOMFORTABLE"
> TIM SCHAFER

Bafflingly, as groundbreaking as the concept was, trying to get a game about dreams funded was a nightmare. Tim reflects on his time pitching the working demos to publishers, "The most telling thing was when someone from one of the publishers said, 'Oh wow, that's really cool, that's very creative! It's just too bad people aren't publishing creative stuff these days.'" The trouble was, that's exactly what Double Fine was all about.

"We liked to make games that made people feel a little uncomfortable, because they hadn't seen anything like it before – but, if they gave it a chance, they'd really like it." While the 54-year-old Double Fine 'head honcho' says he didn't really know how to go about finding a publisher at first, he "lucked out", after watching Bill Gates announce the Xbox at the Game Developers Conference. "Later, I gave a talk on character design and Ed Fries from Microsoft and Xbox was there – we started talking and I started pitching *Psychonauts*. Ed always seemed the most supportive of games as art." Although Xbox backed out of plans to launch *Psychonauts* as an Xbox premier title, publisher Majesco swooped in to save the day.

While critics and gamers were blown away by *Psychonauts*' stunning originality and level design, it was somewhat of a commercial disappointment. But, amazingly, having sold just 480,000 copies

MEET THE CAST

PSYCHONAUTS' DIZZYING ARRAY OF DAMAGED PSYCHICS

RAZ

The undisputed star of *Psychonauts* is Razputin 'Raz' Aquato, a young psychic who has risen through the ranks to become a junior Psychonaut. Raised in a family of circus performers, he boasts remarkable acrobatic abilities, bolstered by immense psychic abilities. Most importantly, his kind-hearted, optimistic and determined demeanour make him uniquely suited to help others resolve their inner conflicts.

LILI ZANOTTO

Daughter of the Grand Head of the Psychonauts, Truman Zanotto, despite always skipping class, Lili is a naturally gifted psychic. Although she generally prefers the company of plants to people, she falls in love with Raz, before going on to work at Psychonauts headquarters, known as the Motherlobe.

COACH OLEANDER

Having watched his butcher father kill his pet bunny as a child, Oleander was later barred from entering the military for being too short. A drill sergeant-style coach at Whispering Rock Psychic Summer Camp, he is later driven mad, enlisting the support of Dr Caligosto Loboto to take over the world, before being guided back by Raz.

DR CALIGOSTO LOBOTO

A mad unlicensed dentist and scientist, Loboto loves tugging teeth and experimenting on fish. As a child, when his parents discovered he had psychic abilities, they forced him to undergo an ice pick lobotomy. Despite conducting some seriously nefarious schemes involving the mutant Lungfish and Brain Tanks, Raz later helps him retrieve his moral compass.

between 2005 and 2010, in the next five years that number blew up to 1.2 million, making it a sleeper hit. Even as Double Fine went from strength to strength, with Tim leaping from one creative powerhouse to the next, Raz and the gang remained entrenched deep within his mind. "There were years where I never thought about it, but I did open a little document when we were shipping *Psychonauts*, because we kept having ideas for levels, like the idea of a level set in a gambler's mind. Even back in 2005, I was like, 'Yes, I've got to do that someday,' so I started writing down these little ideas."

There was certainly no shortage of them; people were always coming up to Tim with concepts for *Psychonauts* levels. "Usually they'd meet someone, or something strange would happen in their family, and they'd think, 'Oh, what's going on inside that person's head?', and they'd start to think about how that could be represented – so I took notes. There were also some thoughts, like if we ever did a sequel, I really wanted to explore Ford's mind; why it's shattered and what would happen if you put him back together. Would that uncover some secrets about his past? Part of me was thinking, 'I'll never do that,' and then it happened!"

In 2015, a decade after the release of *Psychonauts*, Double Fine launched a crowdfunding campaign on Fig, hoping to raise $3.3 million for a sequel. Securing almost $1 million in a single day, the team went on to raise $500,000 more than they'd hoped, from more than 24,000 backers. However, the game was going to take time. Fortunately, Double Fine was already working on a project that was a perfect fit for the franchise; creating an opportunity to whet fans' appetites in the meantime.

Keen to create a VR game which avoided the then-typical problem of motion sickness, Tim's solution was to just fix the player in one place; an idea that fitted perfectly with *Psychonauts* – where players could just do what they needed using psychic powers. "I'm especially susceptible to that kind of nausea so I was like, 'Let's strap Raz in a chair for the whole time,'" he laughs. "But it's a very atmospheric game, it's very moody. The music is great and it sets up a lot of the story for *Psychonauts 2* in some ways."

Psychonauts In The Rhombus Of Ruin was a roaring success, giving fans a long-overdue blast from the past, using state-of-the-art tech. However, it reminded Tim that Double Fine was not so much competing against the original's true legacy, but

» [PC] Richard Horvitz voices Raz in all three *Psychonauts* games.

» [PC] The original *Psychonauts* was eventually released on PC and PS2 after debuting on Xbox.

SASHA NEIN AND MILLA VODELLO

The German son of a cobbler, Sasha ran away from home after entering his father's mind and discovering an obscene memory of his mother. Milla, meanwhile, was deeply traumatised when the orphanage she worked at burned down. The two later became Psychonauts, travelling on daring missions across the world together, before falling in love.

FORD CRULLER

One of the original Psychonauts, the Psychic Six, Ford was an eminent psychic, before old age saw him reduced to the role of dispatcher. Suffering from psychoactive-induced multiple personality disorder, Ford now serves as Raz's mentor and guide. He can be summoned by simply waving a strip of bacon.

Ludicrous Levels

Inside some of gaming's most imaginative levels

The Milkman Conspiracy

Hailed as one of the greatest levels of all time, this takes place in the mind of a paranoid asylum security guard. Set in suburbia, it features unpredictable gravity, an inordinate number of CCTV cameras and dizzyingly winding roads, representing the guard's twisted conspiratorial logic; with eyeballs and G-Men watching suspiciously from every corner.

Black Velvetopia

Reminiscent of a Spanish city, Black Velvetopia is set against an incredible canvas of black velvet, overflowing with bright fluorescent colours. A massive, pink, raging bull named El Odio constantly barrages through the streets, laying waste to any who dare linger in one place for too long.

Waterloo World

Unlike Lungfishopolis, where Raz is blown up to a massive size, Waterloo World sees him shrink down to become part of a board game, which he controls with Telekinesis. Set in the mind of the straightjacket-clad Fred Bonaparte, Raz has to help the poor soul defeat his notorious ancestor, Napoleon.

Loboto's Labyrinth

If there was any doubt, journeying through the mind of a mad unlicensed dentist is somewhat of a horror show. Starting *Psychonauts 2* with a crunch, the level is a hellscape of stuffy offices, gums, teeth and water. A dentaphobe's worst nightmare.

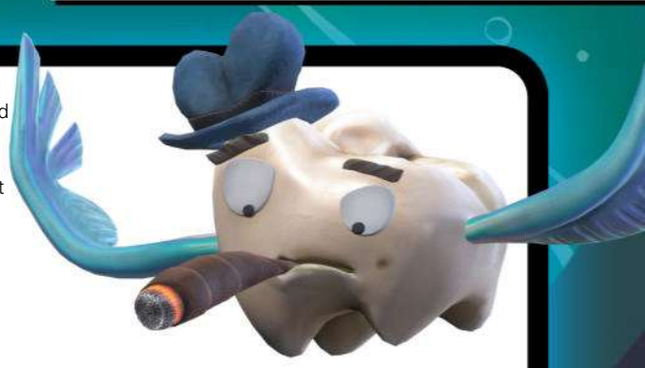
Psi King's Sensorium

This level sees Raz enter the mind of a brain that's been trapped in a jar since the psychedelic Sixties. Deprived of all senses, its owner has lost his real-life identity and memories; and is now represented by an entity known as the Mote Of Light, voiced by Jack Black. Once Raz reconnects the mind to its senses, the world explodes into a psychedelic cacophony of colour and sound.

with people's nostalgic memories of it. "People have anti-aliasing in their memories; they improve the lighting and they only really remember their favourite parts. So, we knew that when people saw a screenshot of *Psychonauts 2*, they'd probably think, 'Oh, that's how *Psychonauts* looked.' But you look back at *Psychonauts*, and it's like wow, we had not figured out how to light faces then!"

No one had their finger on the pulse like Tim; over the years, he'd always maintained a special rapport with the *Psychonauts* fans, who made a point of coming up to him dressed as G-men every PAX. "I felt like my job was to remind the team of all of the things that the fans were going to care about." This was especially important, given that the team had swelled to almost double its size; taking on plenty of newcomers, in addition to the old guard. While *Psychonauts*' older staff helped maintain consistency, new recruits challenged them to improve, for example, the combat, and the economy of the game. However, on a few occasions, Tim had to intervene.

One example was the Clairvoyance power, which allows Raz to see through the eyes of other characters. In the original game, when Raz looked at himself through others' eyes, he would see himself depicted by an enormous range of 2D illustrative interpretations; different almost every time. When some new team members thought the 2D characters weren't necessary for the sequel, Tim intervened, "I'm telling you, I know it doesn't really seem like a load-bearing design



element, but for some people that little Clairvoyance character is their favourite thing in the game."

In many ways, coming up with new ideas was much harder the second time around. "It was really easy in the first game," reflects Tim. "I'd never seen black velvet in a videogame before, so it was really fun to do a black velvet level". He continues, "But in the second game, it was a lot harder, because indie games have become a lot more experimental, and games have gone to some really cool places in the last 20 years. So I was kind of like, 'Let's have this level that's all about paper,' and then I'd realise, 'Oh wait, that's basically *Tearaway*, that's already been done,' so we had to dig a little deeper and combine weird things like hospitals and gambling."

> "WHEN YOU SPEND FIVE YEARS PUTTING YOUR HEART AND SOUL INTO SOMETHING, YOU'RE REALLY CLOSE TO IT"
> TIM SCHAFER

Level design was always the "special challenge", says Tim. "Are they totally original? Did they make you say 'Wow' and question your perceptions of reality and scale and space? And do they metaphorically represent the emotions that the characters are going through? There are all these things that levels in a 'normal' platformer wouldn't have; especially not this kind of symbolic meaning to every piece of architecture in every level. Sometimes we'd get a level or design roughed out and play it and just sigh, 'OK back to the drawing board.'"

Another challenge was fine-tuning the game's intricate quest designs. While planning out old adventure games was fairly simple, *Psychonauts 2* was a different beast entirely. "Our lead designer, Seth Marinello, had to figure out the quest flow, and that got really complicated because we like to have these areas where it's nonlinear and you can do any level in any order – which means you might get any power in any order, which means you might need a certain power for a certain level and not be able to get through because you don't have it. That's what Seth had to design and redesign, and figure that out as we went along."

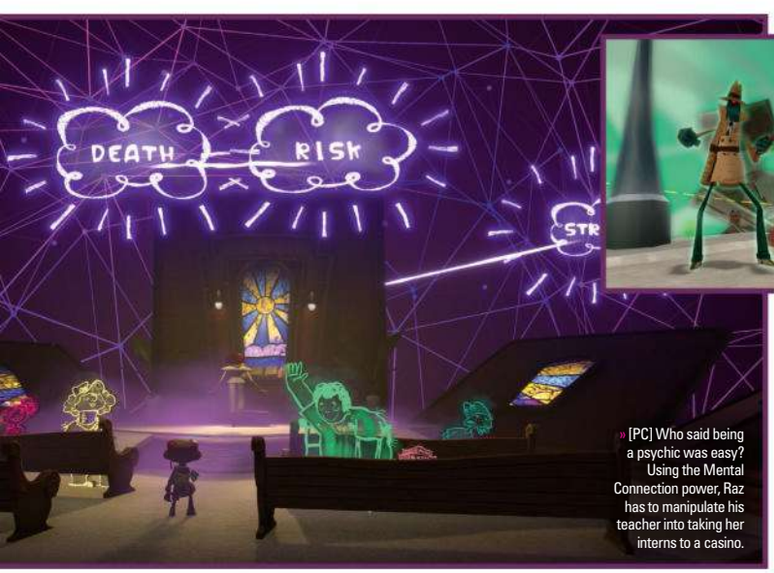
With so much fine-tuning, after millions of dollars and several years, it seemed the team had finally reached the end of its tether. Although most of the game was complete, by 2019, with no funds left, it was looking increasingly likely that some serious compromises were going to have to be made. "We had kind of hit the end of the road and were going to have to cut a lot of the game, including polish and boss fights, and it would've been a pretty rough landing." Suddenly, Xbox Game Studios swooped in to save the day, acquiring Double Fine in a deal that allowed the company to have its cake and eat it too; giving it the time and funding it needed to finish off the game, while retaining independence.

Although the original *Psychonauts* game was celebrated for its well-intentioned approach to mental health; Tim believes the team got a lot of that right "by accident". "Some games are like going through a Burt Reynolds movie or something where you're going through a warehouse, you're shooting a bunch of things, you're taking out pillars, you drive out the building, the building collapses and you leave this wake of destruction behind you everywhere you go. I feel like Raz always improves every mind he goes through; he sorts the baggage and he leaves the person a little healthier. That's just what feels right for Raz and the themes of the game, but we did it on purpose the second time."

Reflecting a heightened sense of nuance, Double Fine brought in the mental health charity, Take This, to help write an advisory, and identify how to avoid stigmatising language and stereotypes. Tim adds, "I think the second game has a lot more discussion about how powerful this tool that Raz has is, and how he has to do things and be better. In the second game, he gets consent for going into peoples' minds, which is a very subtle small change but I think a big difference between 2000 and 2020. It's not that consent was just invented, but people talk and think about it more." Although the team spent the last year-and-a-half working under Covid lockdown, amazingly, the pandemic didn't have much of an impact on efficiency. "The team did great under quarantine; different people had different struggles," explains Tim. "People who had small kids had a struggle, people who lived alone had a different struggle and so on. The morale and mental health of the team was the biggest challenge but functionally, the team figured out ways to have the right meetings in the right spaces, how to view things together, how to play the game together and how to get together socially. They figured out great ways to achieve all of those things and we shipped this game in quarantine and I think it didn't really miss a beat because of that, miraculously."

After six years of development, and a 16-year wait, *Psychonauts 2* landed to universal applause; elevating the legendary original to even greater heights. Tim believes the franchise has been boosted by its inclusion on Microsoft's Game Pass subscription service, which is perfect for games that are a little "weird".

Reflecting on the game's stellar scores, Tim muses, "It just felt like the right game at the right time". He elaborates, "I felt that we had a special game on our hands, but you never know what's going to happen or if anyone's going to notice. When you spend five years putting your heart and soul into something, you're really close to it, and you're like, ''What did we make? I can't tell! Does it have enough?" If the reception is anything to go by, it certainly does. ✱



» [PC] Who said being a psychic was easy? Using the Mental Connection power, Raz has to manipulate his teacher into taking her interns to a casino.

» [PC] Raz meets all manner of interesting characters on his bizarre adventure.

» Art director Scott Campbell drew and redrew characters over and over until he was happy; Raz was originally conceptualised as d'Artagnan.

MODERN CLASSIC

SUPER MEAT BOY

Old-school platform games were often incredibly tough, but not always for the right reasons. This is how a pair of plucky programmers took all the best bits of yesteryear's games to make a modern classic

■ DEVELOPER: TEAM MEAT ■ SYSTEM: PC ■ GENRE: ACTION

Two-dimensional platformers are a go-to for indie developers, largely because of the simplicity of the format. Basic as they are, though, it's easy to look at classic examples from gaming's past and just assume that replicating them would be easy – you only have to look at the number of platformers on the mobile and freeware scene that range from dire to passable to see that isn't the case. Precision is key, as is understanding what it is about platform games that makes them enjoyable.

Having grown up with the likes of *Mario*, *Metroid* and *Castlevania*, the two-man Team Meat was fairly well-placed when it came to turning its proof-of-concept browser-based hardcore platformer *Meat Boy* into a full release, and they always knew they wanted it to retain the challenge seen in so many games that predate even their own Nintendo education. "I think we went into it to make a game referencing retro videogames and those games were notoriously difficult," says Edmund McMillen, the chap behind the art and design of *Super Meat Boy*, as well as numerous individual projects separate from Team Meat including *The Binding Of Isaac* and a selection of smaller releases available on Steam through *The Basement Collection*. "We were going in that direction from the beginning."

But the goal wasn't just to make a hard game, but rather one to take the difficulty of classic platformers and make it relevant and rewarding to a modern audience. "That was the whole goal when designing it – let's think outside the box here. The environment has changed – the rules have changed," explains Edmund. "Videogames have changed drastically over the years and I think the reason why *Mario* and *Ghosts 'N' Goblins* and all those games were so difficult back then and that their design was more frustrating than difficult was that all those people had previously developed for back then was arcade. And that's all about getting as many quarters as you can from the player, so the penalty was really high – that's how you made money. Coming out of the arcade generation to the home console, the difficulty came through but the frustration factor grew immensely – you couldn't just pump more quarters in to get more credits. With *Meat Boy*, we designed around the way things had changed. We took the penalty down to

» [PC] Each world opens with a short sequence riffing on a classic opening scene, from *Street Fighter II* to *Castlevania*.

INFLUENCES

The games that inspired Super Meat Boy...

SUPER MARIO BROS.
STRIDER
MORTAL KOMBAT

» [PC] Huge spiked gears are perhaps the most common hazard in the game. They never get any less terrifying, either.

THE TEAM

The people that made Super Meat Boy happen

TOMMY REFENES
CODING

EDMUND MCMILLEN
ART/DESIGN

» [PC] Having the game play all your runs back to you at once was inspired by a popular *Super Mario World* ROM hack.

zero but kept the difficulty really high. In fact, we could push the difficulty much higher because of that reduced penalty and frustration."

Each bitesize stage in *Super Meat Boy* can be finished in seconds, with failure forcing an instant restart – one brief burst of skill is all it takes to get you through the expertly-crafted levels, and a misjudged jump can't erase past successes, only demand a whole new set. But as well-designed as their game may be, Edmund (with his experience in random generation thanks to *The Binding Of Isaac*) and Tommy both reference *Spelunky* as an example of how traditional level design might not even be the best way to do things anymore.

"I think random generation is the new arcade formula for games – a new way to get people constantly replaying but instead of playing for the high score, they're playing for the enjoyment factor of the new experience every time," Edmund tells us. "I wouldn't say it's the future of games but I would say that it's a good... I don't know if it's a genre or what, but it's a new design architecture that you can design games around and just make them endless, like an arcade experience." ✱

» [PC] You can't hear it in a screenshot, but Danny Baranowsky's soundtrack is crammed with absolute bangers.

MODERN CLASSIC

INSIDE

Explore the clever, creative, and expertly crafted puzzle platformer, built on its spiritual predecessor, and uncover why it deserves its classic status. Paul Walker-Emig takes you inside… Inside

Before ***Inside*****, there was *Limbo*.** Known for its distinctive silhouette-like art style, some memorable arachnophobia-inducing moments, and its open-ended storytelling, it is a well-crafted puzzle platformer that received plenty of praise. Enough to ensure that there would be interest in whatever was to come next from the studio that created it.

The genesis for what would become *Inside* was a piece of concept art that depicted what we will only describe, to avoid any spoilers, as 'the thing', created by Playdead artist Morten Bramsen. If you've played the game, we are sure you know what we're talking about. That piece of art ended up being the reference point for the entire game's visual style, the gravitational core for its structure, and the revelatory pivot for the themes with which it plays.

Working back from that, Playdead managed to create a game with rare artistic precision. The team knew where it was going, it knew what it wanted to achieve, and it tuned everything with that specific destination in mind.

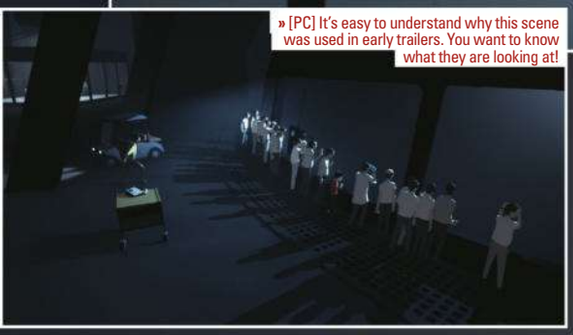
Inside starts in the same way as its spiritual predecessor. You take control of a young boy in a forest, without being given any context for where you are or what you are doing. You simply do what anyone would do with a controller in your hand and a character on a 2D plane on the screen in front of you. You move right.

You never hear a word of dialogue uttered in *Inside*, nor see a line of explanatory text appear on-screen. Yet, almost instantly, the game starts telling you its story. You can spot the uneasiness in the boy's movements and hear the anxiety in his breathing. You know that all is not well. Soon, you find yourself running from masked men trying to hunt you down as you're introduced to a dystopian world that's defined by the crumbling architecture you move through, the people you see marching in unison below you and the puzzles you must solve to progress. *Inside* is masterful in the way it paints a picture of its world using only the language of games. It is the floorboards that break under your step, the terror you feel as a hand reaches for your ankle as you pull yourself up from the water's edge, the mind-controlling technology you use to manipulate braindead slaves slumped in cages that draw the contours of this dark world and offer an insight into the grotesquery and injustice that underpins it.

The way that *Inside* musters every element with military discipline – sound, animation, visuals, mechanics, pacing, and so on – to achieve its ends doesn't just apply to its storytelling. Every moment in this game is meticulously crafted. We think of the rabid barks of attack dogs bearing down on the young boy as he runs to safety. You hear his breathing quicken with exertion and fear as the snapping jaws come closer. Inevitably, you leap to safety at the last possible second, the game poised in such a way as to squeeze every last possible ounce of tension out of the encounter.

» [PC] *Inside* is beautiful in its own twisted way.

» [PC] *Inside* excels in creating haunting visuals that stay with you long after the credits roll.



» [PC] It's easy to understand why this scene was used in early trailers. You want to know what they are looking at!

» [PC] Playdead used its lighting tools to create a gauntlet of haunting environments.

> "You're always encountering something new, something interesting"

This is a game that makes the case for the value of design in a world where procedural generation is in fashion. It always has you in the palm of its hand, always has you where it wants, and does so without feeling contrived. Perhaps you're uncomfortable with the idea that your experience is in the iron grip of a designer in a medium where your freedom is what makes it unique. Well, if you've finished the game, you'll know that that's kind of the point.

When it comes to the game's puzzles, there are no duds. In part that's because *Inside* respects your time. If an idea is repeated in any way, that's only because there's another layer to it that's worth exploring or a way that it can be twisted to give it a new dimension. That means there's no fat to trim. You're always encountering something new, something interesting, something surprising, shocking, or scary. There are a few games that couldn't learn from it in that respect.

The best games leave you thinking about them when you're done and *Inside* certainly falls into that category. You'll think about the ending. You'll think about the journey. You'll think about what it all means and what *Inside* has to say about videogames.

It's far from the first attempt to reflect on control and agency through games – *BioShock* delivered its "Would You Kindly" moment all the way back in 2007, for example. However, it's arguable that no game has been as successful in holding up a mirror and playing with that theme, thanks to the way that *Inside* uses the language of games as its sole means of communicating with the player.

Even if that aspect of the game holds no interest for you, *Inside* still deserves its place in the canon of videogame classics. It deserves it for the brilliant puzzles, the clever ideas, the beautiful animation, the incredible sound design, and the way those elements are threaded together with supreme artistry and skill.

We're not sure we'd ever call a game perfect, but *Inside* is very close. ✱

» [PC] The boy in *Inside* has a vulnerability that's reminiscent of *Limbo*.

THINGS OF NOTE

STAY IN LINE

This section where you have to follow the movements of shuffling slaves to hide in plain site is one of the most memorable. It shines with significance at the end.

LOOKING BACK

There are lots of *Limbo* parallels to spot in *Inside* but the most obvious is the cameo of the mind-controlling glow worm that's attached to this pig.

UNDERWATER EXPLORATION

Inside knows how to create tension and the game's terrifying underwater sections are some of the best examples of that.

POETRY IN MOTION

The animation in this game is fantastic. Not just because it feels realistic, but because subtle movements show you how characters are feeling.

CORNFIELD

There are a number of hidden secrets to discover in *Inside*. Once you've found them all, you'll want to return to this cornfield…

MODERN CLASSIC

Paul Walker-Emig reveals how a masterpiece mixing hardcore challenge and a personal tale about mental health is able to stand shoulder to shoulder with the some of the greatest games in the genre

Maddy Thorson came to prominence as a developer for creating the closest thing to a 'killer app' the ill-fated Ouya console ever had in the form of the 2013 release, *TowerFall*. Whispers about the multiplayer arena-battler's brilliance erupted into a chorus of praise as soon as it left the confines of the Ouya and made its way onto PC and PlayStation 4 as *TowerFall Ascension* in 2014, hailed as a leading light among a spate of indie games breathing new life into local multiplayer gaming at the time. The game's perfectly precise mechanics suggested that this was a developer with the potential to create a spectacular platformer in the single-player space and so it proved to be with its next project.

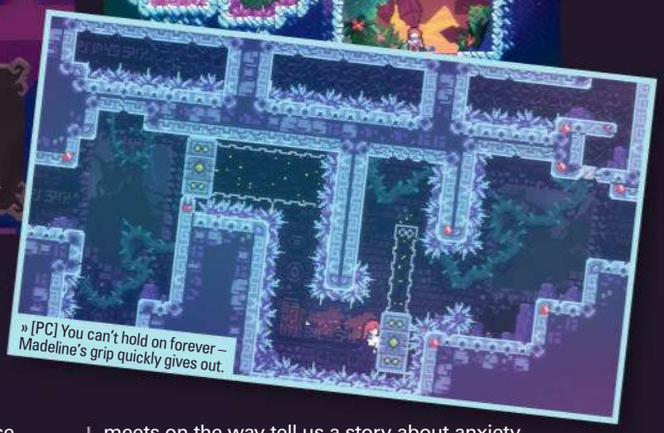
Celeste began life as a game jam creation made in four days by Maddy Thorson and Noel Berry for the Pico-8 – a virtual console that emulates the strict limitations of Eighties gaming hardware. Seeing potential in their rock-hard old-school creation where you have to platform your way up an icy mountain, the duo decided to expand the concept, working with the rest of their colleagues to create what would eventually become the critically acclaimed platforming masterpiece that is *Celeste*.

Celeste is a game about climbing a mountain. You take control of Madeline, who can run, jump and perform a mid-air dash in eight different directions. This limited palette of abilities has to be combined in intricate patterns that require perfect timing and precision to overcome elaborate platforming challenges composed of sharp spikes and deadly drops. You will die a lot, but quick restarts allow you to keep throwing yourself at a problem and refine your technique until you've mastered a section and can make your way out. It's a repeating loop and confronting and overcoming the seemingly impossible gives you an intoxicating sense of godlike gaming skill borne out of incremental bouts of trial and error and the odd thrilling edge-of-the-seat moment of improvisation that sees you scrape through on quick reactions and a bit of luck.

As you'd expect from a mountain following videogame logic, things get harder as you

» [PC] *Celeste* deals with the issue of mental health with delicacy and understanding.

» [PC] Golden feathers transform into a flying ball that has to be guided carefully to safety.



» [PC] You can't hold on forever – Madeline's grip quickly gives out.

> **"Madeline's growth is brilliantly tied into what you are doing in-game"**

THINGS OF NOTE

SECRET STRAWBERRIES

You'll often spot, and sometimes find in hidden places, strawberries floating around the level. These offer an extra challenge for those who want it, testing your skills to see if you are able to grab them.

B-SIDES

Hidden collectible cassettes unlock harder B-side versions of levels. Beat them and you unlock an even harder C-Side.

TEST TIME

Setpiece boss-like sections are used effectively to ramp up tension and test the skills you've built up.

MOUNTAIN MELODIES

Celeste received a number of award nominations for its fantastic soundtrack, composed by Lena Raine.

SPEED CLIMBING

Celeste became a huge hit in the speedrunning community, which helped contribute to the game's profile and success.

progress towards the summit. This increase in complexity tests the skills you've built up in a satisfying way, but *Celeste* doesn't just rely on that to keep you interested. New ideas are introduced, including platforms that change position every time you dash, boss-like encounters and diamonds suspended enticingly in mid-air that recharge your dash when you hit them, creating the potential for sections where you are essentially flying through the air, never touching the ground.

As tricky as these additions can make the game, it always works, thanks to pixel-perfect platforming and flawless controls that ensure that mistakes always feel like they are your own fault. And if it is too hard for you, *Celeste* also deserves to be credited for its fantastic difficulty system. Rather than having a binary choice between the rock-hard standard difficulty and an Easy mode, *Celeste* lets you tweak a number of assists. You can change how much stamina you have for climbing, change the speed of the game, or give yourself more air dashes. It's a fantastically flexible system that allows the game to be accessible to all ability levels without undermining its hardcore nature.

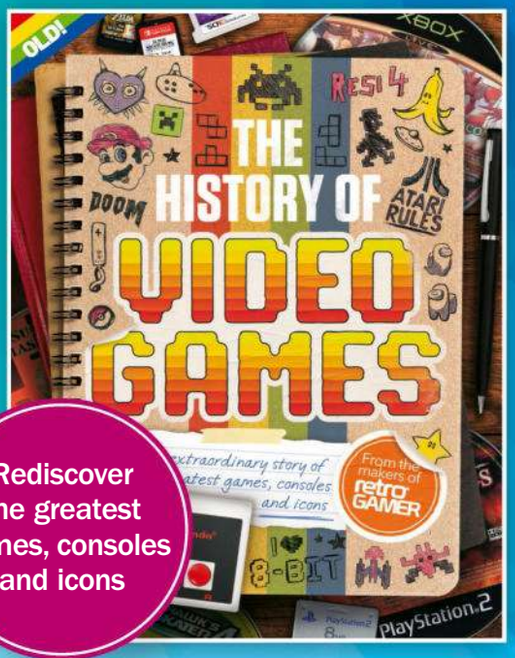
We've dealt with the literal part of climbing the mountain, but there's also a metaphorical one. *Celeste* is a game about struggles with mental health, which deeply affects protagonist Madeline. Her plight to climb the mountain, her conflict with a shadow-version of herself called Badeline and the interactions she has with characters she meets on the way tell us a story about anxiety, how it impacts Madeline's life and how she deals with it. Madeline is well-written and likeable, the story beats are well-paced, and, perhaps most importantly, Madeline's growth and experiences are brilliantly tied into what you are doing in the game. In other words, it's not that *Celeste* tacks a personal tale about an important mental health issue on top of a fantastic platform game. Rather, those two components are inherently interrelated, woven together in such a way that they echo and enhance each other to the game's benefit.

Breaking into the canon of all-time great platformers is no easy feat, especially when the likes of the *Mario* games from the NES and SNES era – from which the early *Celeste* drew some of its inspiration – set such a high benchmark so early on. *Celeste* is a platformer of such high quality that, with the bare bones of jumping and a dash, it manages to do just that.

Get that core right – the platforming – and we already know, courtesy of the aforementioned *Mario* series, just how well the immortal 2D platformer ages. Just as the brilliance of those 30-year-old games continues to shine today, so will *Celeste*'s in the future. Every time we return to it we will be reminded of the high quality that permeates every aspect of the game – its pixel art, incredible soundtrack, pacing, level design, well-considered difficulty settings, storytelling and, of course, that pixel-perfect platforming. It's one of the best ever made and will retain that status for a long time to come. ✱

» [PC] Madeline is an endearing protagonist that you can't help but root for.

» [PC] Madeline struggles to deal with confrontations with her shadow-self, Badeline.



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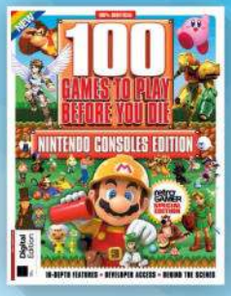

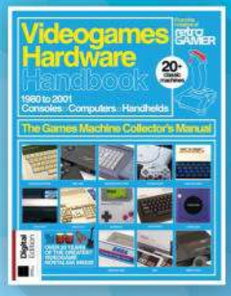

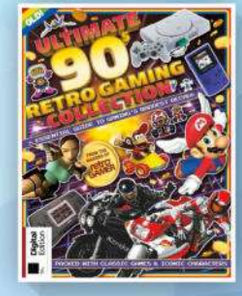

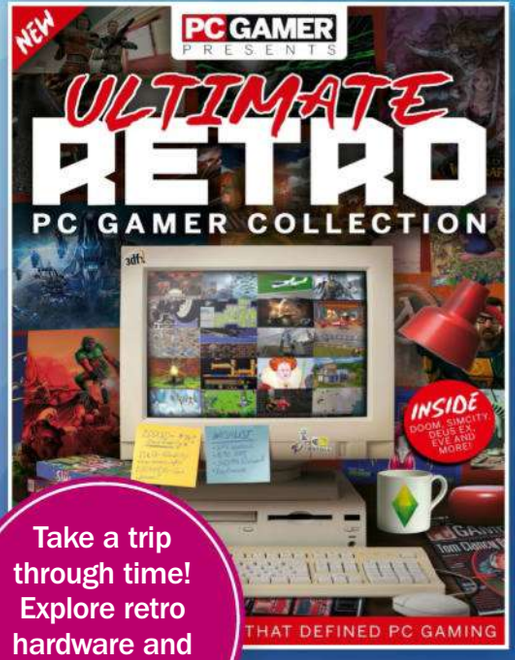

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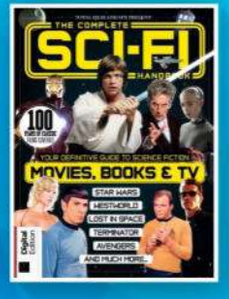

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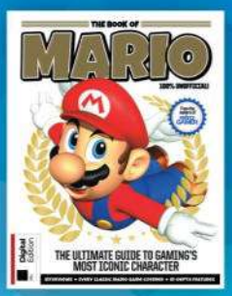

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